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GEORGE BELLAIRES

DEATH IN
THE
NIGHT
WATCHES



Death in the Night Watches

A Thomas Littlejohn Mystery

George Bellairs



MYSTERIOUSPRESS.COM



CHARACTERS

THE WORTH FAMILY, OF TRENTVALE HALL, TRENTBRIDGE.

Henry, Gerald, Alice ... Children of William Worth, deceased.

Vera, their stepmother, widow of William.

Armand, Count de Châteaulœuf, married to Alice.

THEIR RETAINERS.

Shadrach Matthews, Gardener.

Clara Bossum, Maid.

Vincent Bancroft, Butler.

Miss Rickson, retired "Nanny".

Mrs. Filford, Lodge-keeper.

WORKMEN AT THEIR FOUNDRY.

Jack Cadbury, Fred Hitchon, Wallace Tenpenny, Sidney Pengelly,
Harry Hollas, a team of firewatchers.

Llewellyn Evans, Engineer.

Simon Waghorn, Secretary of the Company.

Wilfred Booth, Assistant Engineer.

THEIR MEDICAL ADVISERS.

Alexander Cragg, M.D.

Leonard Watterson, M.B.

John Firebrace, M.D., F.R.C.S.

Murphy Philips, Veterinary Surgeon

Lancelot Pickthorne, Pharmacist.

THE POLICE.

Detective-Inspector Thomas Littlejohn, of New Scotland Yard.
Inspector Oswald Kane, of the Trentshire County Constabulary.

P.C. Bascombe, P.C. Warman, P.C. Windibank, P.C. Pugmire, all of the Trentbridge Force.

Ex-P.C. Cairns, Landlord of the "Rod and Line".

Ex-P.C. Griffiths, Steward of the Trentbridge Gentlemen's Club.

Silas Capper, County Coroner.

OUTSIDERS.

Emily Watterson, wife of Dr. Watterson.

Bessie, her maid.

Diggs, a drunken ostler.

Major Stanley Underhill, brother of Vera Worth.

Cuthbert Bartlett, a muscular insurance agent.

Veronica Bartlett, his lovely daughter.

Peter Cruickshank, bank-manager turned bookie.

Mrs. Peacop, who obliges at the Gentlemen's Club.

J. H. Wortlye, Director of Education, Trentbridge.

Frederick Hipton, a shifty draper.

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CHAPTER I

THE FIREWATCHERS

“I’LL go the lot!”

“Good luck to you.”

The four men playing halfpenny nap settled down to their game; the man who had made the bid intent on winning it, the rest of them determined to stop him. They all played with great intensity as though the fate of the world depended on their efforts.

A fifth man was sitting apart, with woodworking tools on a bench before him. He was no use at cards. His fingers functioned better than his brain. He was making a wooden model of a Sherman tank for his youngest son. He worked with tremendous preoccupation and zest.

Jack Cadbury, Fred Hitchon, Wallace Tenpenny and Sidney Pengelly playing cards; Harry Hollas making a wooden toy. The five of them constituted the night’s fireguard at Worth’s Engineering Works, Trentbridge.

The men were occupying a glass pen of a room raised on wooden piles and used during the day by the manager as a sort of gazebo from which the whole of this department of the engineering shop and all that went on in it were plainly visible. Before the war the place had been filled with machinery for loom making, but this had now been swept aside to make place for orderly rows of lathes and drills controlled by women. There was ample evidence of the latter lying about the shop, for here and there a cap hung jauntily from the handle of a drill, there were pictures of male film stars nailed on the walls behind some of the lathes, and somebody or other had even placed flowers in old jam jars on the window sills.

Cadbury, who had made the bid, dealt out his cards one by one, almost as apprehensively as one who awaits the results of a lottery which will make him independent for the rest of his life. His opponents aggressively opposed

him, not without a spice of malicious humour at the thought of his possible downfall, which was soon brought about. Laughter and a brief post-mortem preceded the settlement of the sixpenny debts.

“Time for a last round,” said Tenpenny, shuffling the pack of cards. “Then we’d better turn in.”

They slept in turns, one awake; four asleep and the watcher waking the rest in the event of an air raid alert or other ominous alarms.

Hollas raised the finished model against the light and carefully inspected it, closing one eye the better to test the straightness of lines and joints.

“Better see if the boss wants a cup of tea, eh?” he said at length, apparently satisfied with his handiwork and ready to switch his energies on to mundane things again.

There was no reply from the card players, who were not only intent on their game, but who regarded with disfavour Hollas’s habit of kowtowing to the managing director, who was obliged to take his turn at firewatching once a week along with the rest of his operatives and passed the time in his own room in the administrative suite at the farthest end of the shop from the quarters of his underlings.

Mr. Henry Worth was not noted for his sociability and spent most of his firewatching periods at his desk poring over private ledgers and blue prints. During such still night hours he had even discovered and patented improvements in certain aeroplane parts on which his firm was engaged.

As Hollas spoke, Mister Henry, as he was called to distinguish him from his brother and co-director, Gerald, walked through the shop with the dazed air of one who has worked far into the night under a glaring lamp and whose strained eyes and nerves create a strange world through which he roams like a sleepwalker.

Henry was a thin, medium built man, with a big, bald, brightly polished head, clean shaven pink cheeks, sandy eyebrows and dry looking green grey eyes. He had small hands and feet. His fingers were never still; playing with the gold seals on his watch chain, rubbing his smooth chin, fumbling with or adjusting his black-rimmed spectacles, drumming on whatever articles of furniture they came across.

He halted briefly before the card players. He was wearing his formal business suit, as though reluctant to show his men that he could relax by assuming tweeds or flannels. Everybody else wore old, easy fitting clothes,

for although it was against the rules to undress, they all in turn snatched a quota of sleep.

One could almost imagine Henry in the privacy of his own room, meticulously stowing himself into a bunk for a snooze, and lying there like a royal mummy, immobile, to awake in due course with not a crease in his immaculate black jacket and with his grey trousers and stiff collar trim and fresh as from a bandbox.

“A quiet night again, men,” he said, blinking and then screwing-up his eyelids like a child playing blind man’s buff and intent on showing his companions that he is not cheating.

“Yes, sir,” replied the men in unison and, not knowing how to continue the conversation with the great man so separated from them by rank and trade unionism, they remained motionless like four dummies.

The boss, too, seemed out of his element. He fiddled with his watch chain, pulled his lower lip, pretended to inspect the hand of cards of the man nearest to him, and cleared his throat.

The workmen began rather gingerly to play again, but it was a self-conscious effort. Mr. Henry scrutinized the thermometer, then bent again to confirm his first reading of it as though unable to believe his eyes.

“Don’t you find it a bit warm in here?” he asked.

He was trying to be matey, but the men took it wrongly and suspected that he was dropping a hint about shutting off the central heating. They unanimously agreed that the temperature was just right.

“I’m taking a breath of fresh air before I turn in,” grunted the boss at length, giving up the idea of being sociable.

“I’ll leave a cup of tea on your desk, sir,” interjected Hollas, whereat his fellow workers came to life again, glared at him in despair and jerked their heads at him and at one another in disgust.

Henry Worth pursued his way to the main exit, passed through a complicated contraption like a clairvoyant’s tent, made to trap the light and prevent a violation of the total blackout, and stepped into the open air.

The night was quiet and starlit and there was a trace of frost. The church tower of St. Chad’s, a huge silhouette hanging over the works, emitted the chimes of midnight and the tenor bell boomed the hours slowly and almost interminably. It was so pleasant out of doors after the fug of his office, that

Henry Worth felt like staying there all the rest of the watch. A policeman on patrol passed, his heavy feet raising echoes in the street.

“Night,” called the officer, more to make the shadow of Mr. Henry speak and prove his identity than anything else.

“Good night, officer,” replied the managing director.

“Good night, sir. Good night,” repeated the constable, recognizing the speaker and assuming a more deferential and less challenging tone, for Mr. Worth was a J.P.

Henry Worth lit a cigarette and looked about him. His eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness and he could plainly make out his surroundings. The great mass of the works at his back, with St. Chad's on his right. Directly in front of him the railed enclosure in which were stored stocks of iron and steel, coal, timber and other raw products. Until the establishment of regular firewatching arrangements there had been a night watchman in the storage yard, but now the job had been abolished. One of the men on guard duty took a look round every half hour. The coal heaps were the most vulnerable and were raided from time to time by local hooligans. The rest of the stuff was too heavy to carry away without mechanical help, such as was supplied by the winches and the cranes which towered ominously overhead. These machines were driven by a gas engine in a shed at the bottom of the yard. A strange form of power in view of the fact that the main shops were run by electricity. Worth's, however, had done badly until the outbreak of war and part of their works had been idle. There had been no funds for buying new plant. They grew busy to capacity on war work, however, but somehow nobody had thought of replacing the old gas engine by a more modern dynamo. Besides, it continued to fulfil its functions satisfactorily.

It was in the direction of the gas engine shed that Mr. Worth perceived a subdued glow of light, such as might be thrown by a dimmed torch. The beam bobbed about a little, went out and then came on again, as though someone were signalling. Worth took out his keys, unlocked the padlocked main gate of the yard and hurried in the direction of the light to investigate. He suspected that the looters were after his coal again.

Rats scuttled among the timber stacks as the man made his way through the piles of material in the enclosure. Once or twice he stumbled over litter on the ground and repeatedly barked his shins on projecting planks. He

hissed with pain and cursed himself for forgetting his own torch. Eventually he arrived before the engine shed.

The door stood open and swung gently in the breeze. By this time the light had vanished.

Worth entered the building, but dared not strike a match lest he come to grief through any chance escape of gas.

“Who’s there?” he called.

His voice echoed round the piles of material and sounded hollow in the dark shed. There was no reply to his question. Only one sound could be heard; the loud sigh of escaping gas. The place was full of it. Before he had advanced two yards, Mr. Henry turned about. To go further was dangerous, for he already felt himself growing giddy from the heavy, sweet fumes. He must hurry back to the works, rouse the men and have the supply turned off at once. Then they must explore the source of the leakage. It would not do for the work of the morrow to be held up....

Just as Worth reached the door, it was slammed in his face. Desperately he clawed at the rough timber, groping for the handle, seeking the lock. The latter was of the old-fashioned variety, requiring a turn of the key to secure it. In a wild second the imprisoned man realized that someone had locked him in.

Mr. Henry struggled frantically against the overpowering fumes which numbed his brain and invited him to sag to the ground and rest there. He tore again at the wood of the door and then, warned and spurred by an instinct of preservation, knew that it was no use. He must get to the window. The latter was small but accessible. Worth, smothering his face with his handkerchief, reeled towards it. With the last of his energy he seized a handy spanner, smashed the glass and thrust his face towards the fresh, healing air. The rush of oxygen into his lungs almost overcame him. It was like a powerful tonic wine....

Then, from the half darkness outside emerged a large square object which was firmly pressed against the window frame, the only hope of the victim’s salvation.

Worth again tore at the obstruction, another sheet of wood, with his fingernails and pounded it with his weakening hands. It remained immovable.

The strength ebbed from the struggling man. His movements grew convulsive, then slowed down as if projected by a slow-motion camera. He sank to his knees, gasping, each breath drawing in the poisonous atmosphere. He lay flat on his face, his body grew quiet, his fingers straightened with a sudden jerk. At length, he ceased to breathe.

The hiss of escaping gas continued.

Meanwhile, Hollas indoors was growing fidgety about the boss's tea. It had been made half an hour and had by this gone stone cold. Hollas wondered how much longer Mr. Henry was going to dilly-dally in the darkness outside. He thought of brewing more, but feared his companions' scorn.

"Wonder where Mr. Henry is," he said at length as if to himself. "He's not usually this long."

Hollas was a tall, raw boned man, with along, lugubrious face and the sad, apprehensive eyes of the henpecked. In his present predicament he looked ready to burst into tears and with nervous gestures twitched the end of his long nose between his thumb and forefinger.

Cadbury, Hitchon and Pengelly were already in their bunks and two of them had fallen asleep, one breathing with a noise like pipe-smoking, the other snoring already with increasing resonance. The third of the trio was coiling himself in his blankets trying to make himself comfortable like a hen fitting her brood of chickens under her body with troubled, shuffling gestures.

Tenpenny was on the point of retiring, too. He had removed his boots, collar and jacket and stood meditating on something or other whilst ruffling his hair with voluptuous relish. He was a little, stoutish man with a red face and a large moustache and he looked smaller than ever without his footwear. A bright, brass topped collar stud glistened in the neckband of his shirt.

"Aye. He has bin a long time and no mistake. I wonder what's happened to him. Perhaps he's gone home to his own bed—got fed-up with messing about here," he said at length, and he tucked himself in the bottom tier of a triple nest of bunks like a dog entering his kennel.

Hollas couldn't bear it any longer. Wiping his nervous lips on the back of his hand, he made for the light-trap surrounding the door, struggled through the blackout cloth of which it was made, and reached the open air. He

looked about him and listened hopefully, then apprehensively. Not a sound, save the caterwauling of two amorous cats in the storeyard, broke the stillness of the dark.

Slowly and thoughtfully Hollas made his way across the street to the yard. He had brought his torch with him and he flashed it around him as he went. Then he halted. He could plainly hear the hiss of gas as he neared the engine shed. His hair rose in alarm but he pulled himself together.

“Good lord, wot’s ‘appened?” he said to himself as though questioning an omniscient Providence.

He did not wait for an answer to his prayer, for he had flashed his lamp on the open door of the engine house and seen the boss stretched out on the floor.

The place was too full of gas to enter. Hollas fled back to the works to rouse his co-watchers, who wakened from their beauty sleep and somewhat befuddled by it, suspected him at first of another plot to ingratiate himself with Mr. Henry. However, seeing his pale, earnest face, protruding, watery eyes and horrified expression, they followed him, a motley procession only half dressed, to the scene of the tragedy.

Hollas had picked up his gas mask on the way and was able to don it, enter the engine shed and drag out the body into the fresh air.

No use trying artificial respiration. Mr. Henry was as dead as a door nail.

CHAPTER II

WHO KILLED HENRY WORTH?

INSPECTOR KANE of the Trentshire County Constabulary and officer in charge of the Worth Case, was greatly relieved when the Chief Constable decided to call in Scotland Yard. Kane had plenty of theories, but his practical results were few. To tell the truth, he had only once before been engaged on a real murder case, and on that occasion the criminal gave himself up and was certified insane halfway through the investigation. He acquainted Detective-Inspector Littlejohn, who came from the Yard to relieve him of his burden, with the facts of the matter, and of the many theories which his imagination had formulated.

They were sitting over cups of tea in the County Police Office, Trentbridge. It was a bare, depressing building and smelt strongly of carbolic disinfectant. A fair was in progress on the public recreation ground opposite, a drunken man in the cells was yelling abuse and the whine of a sawmill at the back of the place added to the existing bedlam.

Littlejohn's equanimity was in no way affected, however. He was a large, well built officer, spruce, clean and kindly. He was usually assigned to cases needing a lot of good will and tact. The Worth Case certainly required both.

"At first, we thought it might have been an accident," said Kane, putting down an empty cup, pocketing a bottle of saccharine tablets and drying his moustache by using his lower lip across it like a squeegee.

"But there were two or three funny things we couldn't get over. First, Worth's nails and finger tips were torn and contained splinters of wood. When we examined the engine house door, we discovered the reason. He'd been locked in and had been clawing at the back of it. The marks of his nails were plain to be seen. The door was open, however, when the firewatcher found him.

“Somebody must have locked him in, Inspector Littlejohn. Because the lock wasn’t a spring one and we’ve tried again and again to see if the door could have stuck. But it worked quite easily.

“Then, there’s the broken window. It wasn’t smashed when the engine man went home earlier that night. It had been broken from within, too, and with a spanner. Mr. Henry’s fingerprints were on the spanner. He must have done it struggling for air and collapsed under it.

“Again, somebody had opened the main gas valve, which is only used for testing the engine and fills the place with gas in no time if it isn’t connected to the testing gauges. The result of it all was that the coroner adjourned the inquest for further investigation, although it was as plain as the nose on your face that he was sure it was wilful murder. How could he think otherwise?”

Littlejohn removed his pipe and emitted a cloud of smoke.

“And what about motives?” he said. “Have you made any progress there?”

“Well, there are heaps of them,” answered Kane. “First of all, Mr. Henry, the murdered man, is the eldest of a family of three. They’re all like cat and dog. Scrapping and quarrelling among themselves. Can’t be together for half an hour without a right royal row developing. Henry was managing director of the firm and Gerald and Alice, his brother and sister, were on the board as well. Henry and Gerald were always rowing about the administration of the works. Alice married a sponger, a French count, if you please, called Châteaulcœf. Count Chateaulœuf. The Count and his wife want more out of the company than Henry approves and they’re always squabbling about dividends. Also, there’s a stepmother, younger than Henry himself. Old William Worth, founder of the firm, married again in his old age and put the cat properly among the pigeons. There was an awful family shemozzle, I’ll tell you. Which resulted in old William making a funny Will and making his children look like a pack of naughty kids.”

“H’m. We must hear about that Will, Kane....”

“It was just this: he left all he had to his wife in trust. She got the income for life and then it passed to his children. The stepmother draws quite a big income; the children just depend on their dividends from the works and what they can pick up on future prospects, which isn’t much, considering

their stepmother is of their own generation. Now, if one of them had killed *her....*”

“A most malicious sort of a Will and well calculated to cause bad blood. Had the old man a grudge against them?”

“Yes. The two sons didn’t take kindly to their new ma. Naturally, she was doing them out of their birthright. If they’d had the sense not to show it, they might have fared better. But they had rows with the old chap and he just took the cruellest revenge he could think of. It wasn’t fair to his wife, either.”

“No, it wasn’t. How did she take it?”

“Oh, not so badly. She’s a hard boiled one. Had to be to marry a foul tempered chap like old William and forty years his junior, too. It was obvious why she married him. She’s not a bad looker—if you like them on the heavy side and horsey. Came from quite a good family.”

“And what about the daughter ... what’s her name?”

“Her husband’s a French count, or so he says. Count Armand de Châteaulœuf.... I’ve heard it said he was a penniless aristocrat engaged in touting for trips round Paris by night when she met him. Always a bit of a wild ‘un was Miss Alice. She expected her father’d cut her off with a shilling. Instead, he just accepted the situation, because he was figuring on getting married to a young ‘un himself. So Alice and the Count came to live here in one of the lodges at the big house—Trentvale Hall. She doesn’t call herself Countess. Just plain Mrs. Châteaulœuf ... fine mouthful!... It’s my belief that her husband’s a phoney aristocrat. An adventurer....”

Kane gave a knowing nod with his glossy, bald head. As if to make up for lack of hair on top, he had a large red moustache. His nose, a formidable promontory jutting over this copious covering of his upper lip, combined with it to remind one of the sea breaking against the foot of a granite rock.

“And what about your suspicions, Kane?”

“Well, it might have been any of the family. Mr. Henry was the wealthiest of the children. You see, he was of an inventive turn of mind and made quite a packet out of his patents. He was a bachelor and doubtless the family would benefit under his Will. Châteaulœuf and his wife are broke. Owe money all over the place. *They* might have done it. Especially the Count. I wouldn’t put it past him. Never have liked him.”

“Then again, there’s Mr. Gerald, who besides being a bit of a duffer, couldn’t agree with Mr. Henry. Thought he ought to have more say in the affairs of the works. Maybe he was right. Mr. Henry treated him like a bit of a lad. Never hesitated to make him look small before the workpeople, either. Perhaps Gerry got fed up with it and did his brother in.”

“And the stepmother?”

“What should *she* want to murder him for? He managed the works very well and kept the dividends up. Why kill the goose that lays the golden eggs?”

“H’m. Did they get on well after the first shock had died down?”

“Rumour says too well. She wasn’t a bad looker when first she came here. *And* a few years younger than Henry and him a bachelor, and addicted to philandering. You thinking about the woman scorned?”

“Not exactly, Kane. However, what other views have you?”

“One of the workmen might have done it. Mr. Henry was a hard man to work for and dead against trade unions, although he had to put up with them. And until the Ministry of Labour regulations put a spoke in his wheel, he never hesitated to sack a man, whether he had a wife and family or not. Hard as iron was Henry when he set that way.”

“How many workmen do Worth’s employ?”

“About three hundred and fifty hands, men and women.”

“We’re going to have a job hunting for a murderer among that lot, aren’t we?”

Kane blew through his moustache which shook like a tree tortured by the wind.

“I’ll say we are. I was thinking, too, it might have been a bit of fifth column work perhaps. I did hear on the Q.T. that Mr. Henry had just finished an invention which would revolutionise a certain type of fighter ’plane. Perhaps the enemy got wise and put paid to him before he could get it into commission.”

“Perhaps they did,” said Littlejohn without enthusiasm. He wasn’t fond of melodramatic cases or of breaking the ground and then having to hand it over to Special Branch or Military Intelligence. Once he’d set his hand to the plough, he liked to keep straight on until he reaped the harvest.

“Well, sir. What about a look round? We’ll call at the town mortuary first and you can view the body if you like. You’ll see from the medical report

and records of the coroner's proceedings, which are in this here envelope and which you can take with you for perusal when you like, that death was due to coal gas poisoning. After we've seen the corpse, perhaps you'd like to have a look over the works, too, and specially the engine shed."

"Right-oh, Kane. Lead the way."

They visited the morgue and there Littlejohn found the body of a man of fifty or there about; the most impressive characteristics of which were the tight lips and a long inquisitive nose. Owing to the cause of death, the skin retained a pink flush, so much so, that it was difficult to believe that the man was dead at all. But, for the most part, death had robbed Henry Worth of his personality. As far as summing up the man went, Littlejohn might just as well have stood before a waxwork model of him. Kane pointed out the broken finger nails and the finger tips to which splinters of wood still adhered from the poor fellow's last wild struggle to free himself.

The engine house yielded little of any help. Littlejohn examined the large gas engine, which stood silent at the time, for they were not using the winches, and was shown whence the gas which killed Henry Worth had escaped. A nozzle at the end of the cylinder of the engine and fitted with a brass tap had done the trick. Had the victim had time to think clearly, he might have realized what had been done and turned off the fumes in time.

The place had been combed for fingerprints or other helpful signs, but was so dirty and greasy and the litter and handmarks of so many workmen were all over in great profusion, as to render any such researches hopeless.

Kane looked hard at Littlejohn as they left the engine house.

"You see. Hopeless, isn't it? One doesn't know where to start, does one?"

He fixed his blue eyes pathetically on his companion, as though apologising for bringing him there on a fool's errand.

Littlejohn smiled and puffed his pipe stolidly.

"Patience, Kane," he said. "We'd better get some background first. Tonight after dinner, I'll have a stroll up to the Hall and just get an idea of the family environment. A pleasant and easy dose of work to begin with. Then, to-morrow, we'll go to the works and ask a few questions from those concerned. No use beginning among the workmen, now. It's almost time for the finishing hooter."

As if accepting a challenge, a steam whistle gave three sharp blasts. Before its noise had died away, workmen and girls began to pour out of the

factory gates. Like a beehive.... The death of the boss did not seem to have affected the spirits of the workers.

Mr. Henry's capable underlings were continuing the administration and the whole was still functioning like a machine which has been wound up and continues to rundown with relentless precision. The men and girls laughed, chattered and made merry as they dispersed to their various homes. Some of them discussed the crime and its possible solutions dispassionately and with good humour. None seemed unduly afflicted by the tragedy. They had their own affairs to think of; keeping up the standard of work, wondering how their lovers, husbands, sons and friends were faring in the forces, trying to size up the war situation.... Provided work and wages continued and their own little share in the war went well, the elimination of a Mr. Henry or two was of minor importance.

The person who seemed the most perturbed among the throng was the engineer, a Welshman, who was airing his grievances with Celtic abandon.

“Why, with the whole works and town to choose from,” he was saying to his buddies, and indicating those two localities by comprehensive sweeps of his arms at the earth and the firmament. “Why, with the whole works and town to choose from, should somebody select my engine house for the crime ...? Tell me that ... indeed....”

CHAPTER III

TRENTVALE HALL

AFTER a good evening meal at the local hotel where he was staying, Littlejohn lit his pipe and took the pleasant walk to Trentvale Hall. This large old house, dating from the days of Queen Anne, had been bought by the Worths, upstarts of the early nineteenth century, from impoverished gentry who could no longer afford to live there.

Deep woods surrounded the Hall. An ominous silence prevailed in their damp, dark depths, a kind of expectant hush, as if yet another family tragedy were in the offing and ready to burst on the world at any minute.

Littlejohn followed a narrow path through the undergrowth, for the landlord of the hotel had told him that by taking this way instead of circling round to the main gates, he would save himself an hour's walking. Soon, the Inspector came upon a high wall surrounding the gardens of the house and, finding an unlocked door, passed through it into a sudden change of atmosphere, for here were well kept lawns, flower beds and ornamental shrubs.

Although it was long past working hours, an old gardener was still pottering about among the roses, as though afraid that if he left them someone might uproot and carry off the lot. This ancient of days greeted Littlejohn, thinking him to be a curious sightseer, for he had already pocketed quite a considerable sum in tips and downed a few quarts of ale in exchange for information given to the morbidly curious or to newspaper reporters hot on the track of anything connected with the Worths.

“You goin’ up to the ‘All?’” quavered the old one. “Becos’ if you are, you won’t find nobody there ‘cept the servants. All the family be out....”

And he despatched a drop of sweat which had gathered on the end of his noble nose, by flicking it sharply with the back of his forefinger. This

patriarch was of such classic features that for the price of a pint or two of beer he had once acted as model to an artist of no account, who had perpetuated him as Moses in one of a series of stained glass windows depicting all the disciples and prophets. These embellished a distant church and a reproduction of Moses had been used by a firm of grocers on their Christmas almanac.

Littlejohn made a direct attack on the gardener. If he knew anything, he would probably talk.

“I’m investigating the death of Mr. Henry Worth,” he said bluntly.

“Ah, you be the very one I wants to talk to. Kane ain’t any use. He just listens and says nothin’. That sort b’aint in my line. Give and take’s my motto.”

“And a very good one, too. What have you to tell me, grandpa?”

“Aye, grandpa I be, and proper, too. Thirteen grandchilder, I got. And two great-grandchilder, and more on the way....”

Littlejohn was not interested in the gaffer’s family tree and hopes, so to silence him, passed him his tobacco pouch and, sitting on a bench under a tree, persuaded the old man to follow suit. After he had thoroughly cleaned out his pipe and stuffed it so full that it took all the breath he could inhale to make it draw, old Matthews, for that was his name, began to gossip. He had a confidential and persistent manner, constantly seizing Littlejohn by the arm as he progressed, as though fearing his audience would flee. He behaved for all the world like a salesman, varying his style according to the nature of his story, from that of a tout for indecent post cards to that of an importunate pedlar of insurance.

“Lots o’ things I could tell you about goings-on in this place. You’ve been decent to me, ’stead o’ tryin’ to catch me out, like some o’ those newspaper men....”

And Matthews proceeded to revile at length all those who had ignored him as a factor in the case, or who had tried to get free copy from him. Littlejohn smoked on patiently, waiting for useful information, if any. It was pleasant sitting there and if the family weren’t at home, it was as comfortable and quiet under the trees as anywhere else.

“Been funny carryings-on here since old Mr. William brought ’ome a wife young enough to be his daughter. Young Mr. Henry had his eye on her right away. And she knowed it, too. So did the old man. But the old master

never knew what I did. Lots o' things I sees when I'm out and about and people don't know I'm there. Saw quite a bit o' sweetheartin' between Mr. Henry and his stepmother, I did....”

“You *did*?”

“Said so, didn't I? Yes. I seen 'em in these woods when they thought nobody was lookin'. Kissin' and cuddlin' somethin' awful. But it was all over when the old man died and left her all the money. Mr. Henry would hardly speak civil to 'er after that, though she'd have carried on as before. I heard 'er one time, asking Mr. Henry what had come over 'im....”

“That's interesting, Matthews. Did anyone else know this?”

“No. Not they. Didn't I say I seen 'em in the woods as I was about my business....”

Littlejohn could imagine the scene, with the old gaffer eavesdropping and his business waiting for another day!

“But as for killing Mr. Henry ... *he* was more likely to kill *her*, seein' that Mr. William left all his money to her ... income for life ... and the family not to get it until she was dead.”

“How did you know that? I thought it wasn't public property.”

“Nor was it. But I overheard it one day in the garden. Miss Alice's husband, Count Châteaulœuf he calls himself (Chattyluff, was old Matthews's way of saying it), went mad after the Will was read. Came fumin' out into the rose garden to cool off and had to 'ave it all explained to him by his wife before it'd sink in properly. Then, he said he could kill Mrs. William....”

“Did he, indeed?”

“Aye, he did that.... I bet he done in Mr. Henry to get his money, for Mr. Henry was pretty well off from his own efforts. A clever man with his brain was Mr. Henry.”

“I've heard so.”

“Aye. But a spiteful one, too. Bet when his Will's read he's left his money to the dogs' home or something, just to spite 'em. Not that he liked dogs. That was just my bit o' fun. Why, he poisoned Mrs. William's pinkinese with his own hands, he did. She never knew it, but I did. I saw 'im take the poison. My weed killer it was and stole from my pottin' shed.”

“Indeed! Tell me more about this, Matthews.”

“Not much to tell, really. One day I see Mr. Henry among the weed and insect killers in my shed; next day Clara, the maid, tells me Billy, the peke, is ill and the veterinary says he’s picked up poison or something. Dog died. I buried him under the copper beech tree yonder. I didn’t say anythin’ about Mr. Henry. Much as my job was worth and I couldn’t prove nothin’, though well I knewed it was him that done it.”

“Was Mrs. William Worth particularly fond of the dog?”

“No, not very. It was a present to ‘er, so she kept it in the house with her. Fondest of her spaniels, she is. Out-o’-doors woman and does a fair bit o’ shootin’, or *did*, until the government made us gas all the rabbits for eatin’ the crops.”

In the distance a shrill voice could be heard calling.

“Faaaaather … faaaather … where are you? Oh, there you are. Past eight o’clock and your bedtime.”

“My daughter,” said Matthews as a buxom, apple-cheeked woman appeared walking across the lawn. “I live with ‘em at the lodge. Allus sees me to bed. Proper tartar, she is. Treats me like a child.”

The old chap rose stiffly, pocketed the half-crown which Littlejohn gave him, bade the Inspector good night and tottered off like a good boy to his bed. Littlejohn made no effort to detain him. He had given him enough information for one sitting.

The detective strolled on to the Hall, the way leading through a vegetable patch to the back door. A maid, sitting sewing in a deck chair by a small sunken garden, eyed him in friendly fashion. She was apparently a country girl and anxious for someone to talk to.

“Good evening, sir,” she said, laying her sewing in her lap. “You wantin’ to see anyone?”

“Matthews tells me the family aren’t at home.”

“No, sir, but they won’t be long.... Has that old chatterbox been talking to you? Proper old gasbag he is, once he gets started. Since the death of Mr. Henry, he’s never stopped gossiping. Knows all about it, to hear him talk.”

“As a matter of fact, he hasn’t talked much about the murder....”

The maid’s face assumed a frightened expression, as though she had suddenly remembered the tragedy which hung over the family.

“Terrible, sir, that is. Who would have wanted to kill the master so cruelly? I can’t think about it. I’m sure it was an accident.”

“I hear the mistress’s favourite dog died the other week.... By the way, are you Clara?”

“Yes, sir, that’s me. Suppose that old chattering man has told you that, too.”

“That’s right. Did you see the dog when he was ill?”

“Yes, sir. I was there when he was took bad.”

“What happened?”

“The mistress always let him sleep in her room, and that morning, as usual, she gave him a cup of tea out of her early morning pot. He was sick almost at once and took terrible bad. The mistress wouldn’t touch the tea after that, though it was perfectly good, I’m sure. I made it with my own hands. Most like, the dog had picked up something in the grounds the day before. Old Matthews is always putting things down. If it isn’t rats, it’s slugs, and if it isn’t slugs, it’s weeds. Proper old poisoner he is.”

“You made the tea yourself, you say, Clara?”

“Yes, sir. Clean teapot, clean cup, milk from the bottle we used earlier on for our own cups of tea, and no sugar on account of the mistress slimming. How could it have been the tea? It wasn’t fair to me as made it to say it was.”

“Did you put down the tea tray anywhere on the way?”

“Only for a minute on the table just round the top of the stairs, while I got out the biscuits.”

“You left it unwatched for a minute, Clara?”

“Yes. The biscuits being in the linen room, those we use with early cups, of course.”

“Whose room was the nearest?”

“Oh, it’s hard to say. The table’s between Mr. Henry’s and Mr. Gerald’s. The Count and Miss Alice have had separate rooms on the other side of the landing since they came to the Hall after the old master died. Why, sir, what’s the interest in the death of the dog to you?”

“I was just a bit curious. It’s nothing, Clara. Do all the family get on well together?”

The maid’s lips tightened.

“I’m not one to talk about the family, sir,” she answered testily, in a fashion which gave Littlejohn a reply to his query.

Just then, a dog cart came bowling up the main drive and the maid, with a brief word of excuse and good night, hurried indoors. The vehicle carried what the Inspector judged to be Châteaulœuf and his wife.

Littlejohn met the newcomers on the front steps and, after introducing himself and explaining the purpose of his call, asked if he might have a word with them.

The Count's wife was still known as Miss Alice, for the local people, unaccustomed to such titles, could not bring themselves to call her Countess. She was in no way good looking, for though she was dark eyed and vivacious, her nose was too large for her face. She seemed quite happy, however, in spite of being married to one who was generally known as an adventurer. Small of stature, she looked up at Littlejohn with a candid gaze, as though prepared for anything he might ask.

The Count himself was fifty or thereabouts, perhaps ten years older than his wife. He was small and running to fat, but immaculately turned out. He had one eyebrow like a Norman arch; the other was Gothic, for he wore a monocle screwed in. The latter did not improve his looks, because it gave an air of fixed stupidity to one side of his face and he badly needed every appearance of intelligence he could muster. He had the courtly manners of a gigolo towards his wife, who kept a careful eye on him lest he commit any stupid indiscretion. For all that, the pair seemed to get on well together. There appeared to exist between them, in fact, a very rare comradeship. Perhaps community of interests in that strange household had created the relationship.

They invited the Inspector indoors and he took on the pair of them. They reminded him in their behaviour of one person. Each never allowed the other to complete a sentence, but chimed in either in correction, prompting, or corroboration.

The place which they all entered must have at some time been a gun room. Moth eaten heads of deer, foxes, and even a moose, hung round the walls and there were a few sporting guns in cases, too. They seated themselves in ancient cane chairs.

“I don't want to trouble you for long at this hour, Countess....”

Here Monsieur Châteaulœuf smiled delightedly, for the infrequently used title pleased him.

“... but I’d like to know as much as you can tell me about your brother Henry’s affairs prior to his death. Can you throw any light on who might have been responsible? Had he any enemies?”

“Plenty, I would say, Inspector ...” replied Miss Alice, and her husband, who still spoke with an affected French accent, added, “plenty Inspector, plenty. Family ... Bolsheviks, Enemy Agents.”

“He means, Inspector, firstly that there were family quarrels. Secondly, certain hot-heads among the workmen bore him a grudge, especially now, as they’re tied to their jobs by the Ministry of Labour regulations and can’t change when they want. Lastly, my brother had made several discoveries of vital importance to the war effort, which might have caused the enemy to want him out of the way.”

“Were you and Mr. Henry on good terms?”

“On the very best. Ever since childhood we’ve been friends....”

“Friends. Yes. But for Monsieur Henry, we two would have not been accepted back by his father and family. Henry paved the way for us.”

“Had he any enemies in particular, Countess?”

“Well, he quarrelled with my brother, Gerald, but it was the usual family rows. One day they wouldn’t be speaking....”

“... the next ... how you say?... Okay, eh?”

“I see. And what about the workmen?”

“There, I can’t help you,” said the Countess. “He often spoke of agitators who’d sworn what they’d do to him one day, but he never mentioned names....”

“We are not much associated with the works, Monsieur.”

“H’m. Where were the two of you at midnight on the night of the crime?”

The curious pair looked at each other understandingly, as though trying to read each other’s thought with a view to being perfectly in accord.

“In bed,” they both said at once.

“I agree that the hour was late and a poor one for alibis. Can anyone confirm that?”

“You surely don’t think we did it?”

The Countess flushed hotly and spat out the words. This time, her husband said nothing, but his monocle fell from his eye in dismay and converted the Gothic arch into Norman again.

“No. Merely a matter of routine.”

"Well, nobody can confirm it. Miss Rickson, who retired about ten and bade us good night, was the only one, except the servant who gave us supper, who saw us after about nine-thirty. My two brothers were out. Henry was firewatching; Gerald was, as usual, with his cronies."

"Who's Miss Rickson?"

"Our old nanny. A pensioner, who lives with us. She's in at present if you care to see her."

"Thanks. I'd like to."

Littlejohn thought that the views of one outside the family, who probably spent her time watching and putting two and two together, would be interesting.

"Well, I thank you for telling me what you know.... By the way, I understand that Mrs. William Worth's pet dog was poisoned some time ago. Can you give me any information on how it occurred?"

"No, I wasn't interested...."

"The dog was a little pest," interjected the Count. "One day it was alive and barking all over the place, slobbering over us with its beastly wet mouth. The next it was sick and, then, dead."

"That's all we know. We didn't bother," said the Countess, as though drawing a final line to terminate the incident.

"Do you mind telling me where I can find Miss Rickson, then?" said Littlejohn.

The Count sprang promptly to the Inspector's assistance and led him to the door. On the way, they passed a glass fronted gun cabinet before which Littlejohn halted. He was a good shot with a sporting gun himself and could never resist a well turned-out weapon.

"By jove!" he said to the Count, pointing to one in the rack. "That's had bad treatment...."

"Ah yes. That's Vera's. Mrs. William Worth's gun. She had a mishap with it the other week," smiled the Count, a feat which, in view of his monocle, resembled an effort to prevent a sneeze, for one side of his face remained rigid whilst the other became alarmingly contorted.

"Looks as if the barrel's burst."

"Ah, yes?"

"May I see it a minute, sir?"

The Count looked over his shoulder at his wife and shrugged as if dissociating himself from the eccentricities of the English police.

The Countess turned the key of the cabinet and Littlejohn took out the gun.

It was a wonder someone had not been killed. Only a flaw in the barrel could have prevented a burst in the breach, which would have gravely injured, if not put paid to someone altogether.

There was hardened earth adhering to both barrels, one of which was split for at least a foot of its length from the sighting bead.

“How did this happen, I wonder? You’ll forgive the curiosity, but I’m a bit of a shot myself and I’m very fond of a good gun.”

“Vera’s a bit careless,” said the Countess. “She was shooting pigeons just over by the wood and we heard the awful report. Then, she arrived home with a badly bruised cheek and shoulder. Lucky it was nothing worse....”

“She said she must have absent-mindedly put it in the clay wrong way up,” interposed the Count somewhat inanely.

“Funny. Does she usually do that? I take it she’s been brought up to handle a gun.”

“Oh yes. Practically since she was a kid. She was very upset and hasn’t done any shooting since.”

“I’m sorry to waste your time with irrelevancies. Perhaps you’ll show me the way to your old nanny’s room.”

The two Châteaulœufs indicated a room at the end of a passage and left the detective to his own devices.

CHAPTER IV

THE MEN WHO THRIVED ON SQUABBLES

LITTLEJOHN tapped on the door of the room.

“Come in,” said a voice, aged, and rather surprised that anyone should be visiting at that hour.

Miss Rickson was a frail little thing with a thin face and bright beady eyes. She was sitting before a gas fire in a comfortable old fashioned armchair, with a bound volume of some magazine or other on her lap and a knitted shawl round her shoulders.

“Good evening,” said Miss Rickson.

“Good evening, madam,” replied Littlejohn and they smiled at each other as do people of good will when they meet.

Talk of crime in this peaceful sanctuary of a place seemed incongruous, but Littlejohn stuck to his guns and told Miss Rickson why he had called.

“Dear me,” said the old lady, her eyes fixed dimly ahead as though looking far into the past. “It seems strange to think of Henry being dead, and so violently, too. He was always such a good little boy when I had charge of him. Always did his lessons and always did as he was bidden. Different from his brother, Gerald, who was wilful, albeit he had a kind heart and repented his rashness for long after he’d misbehaved. I hope Gerald hadn’t a hand in killing his brother.”

She might have been discussing a work of fiction.

“Had he reason for doing so, Miss Rickson?”

“I dare say. People who always do right are so tantalizing to those who are weaker. And Gerald was so short of money, too, ever since his father died leaving such a preposterous Will. Marrying such a young and good looking wife and bringing her here with two unmarried men in the house! It wasn’t right of him, Inspector. He was always very headstrong and rash,

was William. Now if either of them had killed Vera, I could well have understood it. Money's the root of all evil, Inspector. But *Henry* to be murdered. I can't understand it."

"Did the two men get on well with their stepmother, Miss Rickson?"

The old lady looked up at Littlejohn and her eyes snapped.

"If you're wanting me to talk scandal, Inspector, you've chosen the wrong person. Henry and Gerald got on with their stepmother, as you call her, as well as two men could do with the barrier between them and two hundred thousand pounds!"

"Dear me! So much?"

"Yes. So much; and both of them kept from it by a stupid old man, just like two naughty boys forbidden their pocket money. All because they didn't throw their hats in the air for joy when their father married again and even said he hoped he'd have another son to whom to leave his fortune, by the second marriage."

Miss Rickson was thereupon seized by a fit of coughing, which convulsed her whole frame and held up the interview whilst she recovered herself and mopped the tears from her eyes.

"About the brothers, Miss Rickson. Did they quarrel often?"

"They were always quarrelling. They were like the proverbial Irishman. They thrived on squabbles, which seemed to let off steam for them and clear the air. No murder could have resulted from *their* schoolboy nonsense, for deep down, although few think it, Henry and Gerald were fond of each other. They fought like Kilkenny cats in the nursery, but let anyone else dare to try conclusions with one of them. The other was always at his side. But now that Henry's dead, I don't know what's going to happen to Gerald. You see, Gerald depended so. much on his brother. The last man on earth he'd kill in cold blood, although in rage he might hit him with the nearest heavy object he could lay hands on. Do you know, Gerald once struck Henry with a meat chopper. They'd been ..."

"I suppose the works and responsibility for their success lay heavily on Mr. Henry?"

"Oh yes. Henry was always an engineer. Never happy unless among the machines and tools, even when a boy. He took a degree in engineering at Trentshire University. Gerald went to Oxford and took history honours."

"Gerald's the dreamer, eh, and Henry was the man of action?"

"That's it, Inspector. They were parts of a whole, so to speak."

"To change the topic, Miss Rickson, do you get on with Mrs. William?"

"Of course, else I wouldn't be here. She's a decent girl, although she ought never to have taken William, you know. But she'd had a hard time. Came of a county family, impoverished by those dreadful death duties, Inspector, and I suppose sacrificed herself for the sake of her family. William paid off some mortgages for her father. In fact, William bought her."

Tears sprang suddenly in Miss Rickson's eyes as though she had suddenly realized the truth of what had happened, or perhaps it was from one of those quick flashes of memory which come unbiddeden, seemingly from nowhere, and vanish after saddening the heart.

"They were my two boys always, Inspector. I'd willingly have given my own life, such as remains of it, to have spared Henry such a fate...."

When she had composed herself again, Littlejohn asked Miss Rickson about the death of Mrs. William Worth's toy dog. The old lady's face underwent a sudden change, her lips tightened and she put up her hand as if to ward off a blow.

"I know all about that and the tale Matthews has been spreading.... Perfectly scandalous. I'm sure the dog died from distemper or something."

But the old nurse's tale was unconvincing this time. She seemed to be shielding one or both of her boys.

Littlejohn mentioned the gun accident, but whereas Miss Rickson knew of its occurrence, she seemed to have forgotten it already.

"And now if you'll excuse me, Inspector, it's time for my chocolate after which I shall go to bed. I'm getting old, you know, and can't stay up o' nights like you young ones. So I'll bid you good-bye."

And with that they parted.

Littlejohn, finding himself once more outside Trentvale Hall, stood for a minute wondering if there were anything more he could do that night before returning to his lodgings. An answer came quickly for, with a clatter of hooves, Mrs. William Worth rode into the cobbled stable yard.

Vera Worth was a buxom woman of medium build and seemed full of energy in spite of the tragedy overhanging her home. She was dressed in riding habit and carried a hunting crop. Her attire showed her figure to full advantage. As she approached, Littlejohn saw that she was handsome, too.

Only tiny lines round her eyes, a spot where time first lays his hand, told that she was past forty. The hair escaping from under her felt hat was raven black still, her complexion was a rich brown, but the skin was in no way coarsened by exposure and open-air life. Her full lips and dark eyes marked a passionate and generous nature. A dangerous woman of whom to make an enemy.

Littlejohn introduced himself and stated the purpose of his visit.

Vera Worth received him calmly enough, but with a trace of irritation.

“Can’t the local police handle this affair without bringing in help from all over the country! And why select the family for questioning? Surely, they’re the last people who’d want Henry dead! The works are dependent—or *were* dependent—on him and therefore the family income.”

Littlejohn had heard that the fortune which William Worth left in trust for his wife was in good securities outside the Company, but he couldn’t very well tell Vera so.

“You must allow me to conduct this inquiry in my own way, Mrs. Worth,” he said politely. “We have our own methods.”

“So I understand, Inspector, although I’d have thought the works would have been your first port of call. I’m sure it’s there, among the dissatisfied hands, that you’ll find your man.”

“You haven’t any useful information to give me concerning Mr. Henry’s affairs immediately before the crime, madam?”

“Why, no. Am I Henry’s keeper? Even if I am—or was—his stepmother, he was older than I, remember. We got on exceptionally well, but beyond that, he wasn’t in the habit of confiding his troubles in me....”

“Yes, but other people might have done. It is usually from third parties that one gathers history of the kind in which I’m interested.”

“Gossip, you mean. That doesn’t interest me. As I’ve said before, the works is your hunting ground if it’s scandal you’re after.”

Littlejohn saw that he was not going to get much help from this forthright, self-possessed woman, although he was sure that she knew more than she pretended.

“Were you at home when the crime occurred, madam?” he asked preparing to make his way back to the town.

“I see. You want an alibi. Do you suspect me?”

“No, Mrs. Worth. Merely a matter of routine.”

“Because what earthly good would my killing Henry have done? However, if you want to know my movements on the night of the crime, I was playing bridge with Dr. and Mrs. Watterson until nearly midnight and I left there about one o’clock. I’d been out riding and called on my way back. About nine o’clock that would be. They persuaded me to stay and make up a four.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Worth. That’s quite satisfactory....”

“In that case, I’ll say good night, Inspector. I want to see my horse comfortably settled.”

Littlejohn made off the way he had come. He walked back almost automatically, for his mind was full of the impressions he had gathered at the Hall. He strolled slowly along, his pipe firmly gripped and sticking out aggressively. The air of the woods smelt stale. The breeze feebly wafted through the thick foliage and was laden with the scent of leaf mould and fungus. He felt that from the house behind him eyes were following his progress.

So the Worth family weren’t going to help. Every one of them he had interviewed so far had either a guilty conscience or else was shielding someone else. Even Miss Rickson, the old nanny, got scared when she saw which way the wind was blowing.

No wonder Trentvale Hall was an uneasy place. Old William had certainly put the cat among the pigeons when he made his Will. Silly old fool! Dead and past punishment, he had, during the latter days of his life, sowed the seeds of passion and murder in his own family just like the evil one sowing his tares. It’s a bad bird that fouls its own nest....

First, there was Henry, apparently in love with his stepmother during the lifetime of his father. When the Will is read he drops her like a red hot coal. A passionate, headstrong woman, Vera Worth. Scorned, she might have turned on Henry in wrath.

Then, there was Gerald, whom Littlejohn hadn’t yet met. He was always hard up and eternally quarrelling with Henry about running the works. He, too, might have found his stepmother very desirable and made a kind of three-cornered contest between himself, Henry and old William. What a house! Three purposeful men and an attractive woman. Hate and malice by the bucketful and any amount of intrigue.

And there were the two Châteaulœufs.... Two more dark horses. Penniless, if what he heard was true, and more or less dependent on old William's bounty during his lifetime. Presumably sponging on the widow and the rest of the family after his death.

As for real honest-to-goodness motives for killing Henry, it would be necessary to know how much private fortune the victim possessed, quite apart from his reversion if and when Vera Worth died. If it were considerable and left to the impecunious Châteaulœufs or to Gerald, there might be something to follow there.

There was the death of the dog, as well. And maybe the gun accident had some connection with the crime. But those involved Vera Worth, not Henry.

The whole affair was a beastly mix-up. Indeed, the murder might not have emanated from the Hall at all, but from the works. Some quarrel with a workman, some trouble with one of the women....

Littlejohn had reached the fringe of the wood and his way now lay straight to the town, which stretched like a dark blot down in the valley. Night was falling and one or two lights glowed already from houses in the distance. The air was keener now that the trees had been left behind. Billowy clouds scuttled across the sky, and between them and the valley hung a pall of smoke, product of the mills and furnaces.

The country gradually merged into the town and then came paved streets. Some of the operatives lolled about street corners and in the town centre, smoking and spitting about the place and discussing the war and local news. They eyed Littlejohn as he passed by. Some of them even nodded to him with bold familiarity. The fact of his arrival had been noised abroad. Scotland Yard was on the job! Had they dared, the Inspector felt that some of the idlers would have stopped him and given him some advice and perhaps information with which to be going on.

Littlejohn wondered to himself what would happen if he approached some outstanding member of one of the knots and questioned him in friendly fashion.

“Excuse me, you work at Worth's—I presume. How do you like it there? What do you think of the bosses? Mr. Henry, for example? Is it true that he was a bit of a tartar and resented trade union interference? Well, somebody's got their own back on him at last. Wonder who it could be?”

No. That wouldn't do at all. Littlejohn was a foreign body among these workpeople and as such must be ejected as soon as possible. They might even take the part of the unpopular Worths against him, just because he was an outsider and the Worths were locals.

It was going to be a much harder job than that. Tomorrow, he would go to the works and see what the principal witnesses had to say about it all. Catch them when alone at their benches and interview them without spectators.... That would be it. Meanwhile, sufficient for the day ... There was the "Rod and Line," with supper and beer to cheer him up.

The Inspector made for his hotel and, dismissing the case from his mind, settled down to enjoy peace and quiet for what remained of the evening.

CHAPTER V

THE LANDLORD OF THE “ROD AND LINE”

THE “Rod and Line” is not the best hotel in Trentbridge, but it is the most homely. It had been recommended to Littlejohn by Inspector Kane, not only as a comfortable lodging, but because its landlord was an ex-policeman, Constable Cairns, who, when he received his pension from the County Constabulary, settled down as a licenced victualler intent on keeping his place on model lines. And he made a success of it.

After closing time and after Littlejohn had had a word with Inspector Kane over the telephone about certain routine matters to which he wanted him to attend, landlord and guest settled down for a private nightcap before retiring.

Cairns was a bit overawed at first by the presence of a Scotland Yard detective of the first water under his roof. It was only with difficulty that he could be induced to be natural. He continued to revert to his old stilted official manner and routine type of address until Littlejohn had to tell him about it and point out to him that they met as equals and as landlord and lodger.

The ex-policeman was heavily built with a large, round, red and shiny face. He would have been dubbed a bad life by insurance companies, for he had lost his police force fitness and was putting on too much flesh. Nevertheless, he was shrewd and observant. A mine of local information.

“Mr. Henry spent more money than folks thought,” he said as they discussed the crime over glasses of beer. “Keepin’ a place like this, you overhear lots of things when drink’s loosed the tongue. When wine’s in, wit’s out, they say. I hear a thing or two, sir.”

Cairns winked and tapped the side of his nose with a fat forefinger.

"I'm off to bed, Bill," said Mrs. Cairns, putting her head in the room. "Come up quietly, because I'm sure to be asleep. It's generally the small hours when you get to bed once you start talkin' police stuff."

"I'll not be so long, love," replied the ex-policeman and the comfortable-looking woman, who was almost as big as her husband smiled incredulously at Littlejohn.

"I'll see he comes, Mrs. Cairns," said the Inspector.

"Mr. Henry was a bachelor, as you no doubt know by this, sir," continued Cairns when his wife had departed, after telling them that she'd locked the front door, put out the cat and left the takings in the safe. "But that didn't make him any less fond of the women. He was fond of them, that's true. *And* he spent his money on them. He must have cursed his father often enough for leaving the Will as he did. Mr. Henry liked putting on a show for the ladies of his fancy and I bet he wished Mrs. William would come a cropper when out riding and break her neck, so's he could get his share."

"You really think so?"

"I do indeed. He was very friendly—too friendly, if you ask me—with his step-ma until the old man died and he found out how the Will was made. Then they wasn't seen about any more. No wonder. I bet Mr. Henry's stomach turned over when he heard that Will read out. Not that Mr. Gerald and Miss Alice and that fancy Count of hers didn't feel as bad...."

"You know them all well?"

"Very well, sir."

"And you seem to know all the family business about the Will."

"Everybody did. You see, the local paper publishes details of most local Wills. Mr. William Worth's affairs caused a nine days' wonder in Trentbridge, I can tell you. The talk of the town. Understandable, too, for it was a dirty trick and had in it the seeds of future trouble, as we can see by the present crime."

Cairns went on to tell how his hotel was the Count's favourite haunt. There he met his cronies at all times of the day and evening. These included several other local drones and spongers, among them a bank manager who had recently been sacked for drinking during business hours and for allowing the Count and his associates overdrafts of a type deprecated by his head office and being unable to get them repaid, for he had sacrificed his authority and their respect through excess of bibulous *bonhomie*.

“I know the new manager’s been pressing the Count for repayment. Now, if Mr. Henry had left Miss Alice well provided for in his Will—and I know the two of ‘em were good pals—what about the Count having bumped off Mr. Henry to save himself ...?”

“Yes. That *is* one theory. I must look into it. Meanwhile, did Mr. Henry ever land himself in trouble with his philandering?”

“Not that I heard of. Customers would joke about his carryings-on when they got talkative.... He was too crafty to get himself in hot water with married women, of course. But there’s been some complaints among the hands at the works since they took on girls there. Mr. Henry was too much in the shops where the girls were working. Pawning ‘em, you know. Couldn’t keep his hands off the pretty ones, I hear.”

“So he’d be getting the young chaps with sweethearts there a bit mad, eh?”

“More than that. You see, the attentions of the boss is bound to turn the heads of some girls. Gets ‘em a bit above themselves, like. They begin to look down their noses at honest, hardworking chaps, that type, don’t they?”

“Yes, I quite see that.”

“One case in particular caused a row. Mr. Henry’d been taking Blodwen Evans, a pretty little lass of about twenty, home in his car. Said her home was on his way, which was all a lot of tommyrot. The girl’s head was quite turned about it. Her father got mad. He’s a Welshman with a hot temper, is Llewellyn Evans and doesn’t wrap things up when he’s roused. He works at Worth’s, too, but that doesn’t make any difference. He’s a very religious man. Always at the chapel, a deacon and such like. He’s been heard to say that rather than have his daughter corrupted and sent to the devil by Mr. Henry, he’d kill him.”

“Is that so. Sounds interesting. What does Pa Evans do at the works?”

Cairns buried his nose in his glass of beer, as though keeping his guest in suspense.

“He’s engineer there,” he said at length. “He’s in charge of the electric motive plant.”

“And the gas engine that killed Henry?”

“And the gas engine.”

“We’re getting on, aren’t we, Cairns? I must pay a visit to Mr. Llewellyn Evans and his engines to-morrow.”

“You’re going to have your hands full if you try to follow up Mr. Henry’s affairs with women and what they’ve led up to and how they’ve ended, sir. But I think I would say that Blodwen Evans and Mrs. William Worth were the two who caused the most tongue-wagging in the town. The one because her father kicked up such a fuss about it behind Henry’s back; the other because it was rather a novel experience seeing a chap knocking around the place with his stepmother. And not in what you might call a filial way, either....”

“What kind of a man was old William Worth, Cairns?”

“He used to come in here quite a lot in his time. He was always a bit of a tartar, with a streak of a self made man in him, although, mind you, he inherited his fortune from his forebears. The Worths have been established in this valley for ... well ... I’d say nearly a couple of hundred years. When his first wife was alive, he was steady. She kept him straight. A real lady she was and they do say it was a runaway match. But after her death, he seemed to go to pieces. Drink got him ... and then, of course, there was the depression. The hands at the foundry got a grudge against old William. Said he’d made a big private fortune out of the works in good times and hadn’t stood by them when bad days came. Which I guess was true, come to look at it that way.”

“And how did he get on with his family?”

“As far as I know, there was nothing much wrong. Henry was the bright boy, of course. Worked hard at the foundry. Gerald was a bit of a flop, it seems. Preferred art to industry and his father had to force him home by stopping supplies. A bit spineless, is Gerald, in my opinion. As for Alice. Well, she always was a harum-scarum. Good hearted, mind you, but a bit wild. Who but a madcap would ’ave married a penniless Count the way she’s done? They do say there’s a bit of madness in the family. William’s mother went off her head, I believe ... and his father died with the D.T.’s. So this generation haven’t had a good start.”

“And old William’s second marriage? That would give everyone a shock, I’m thinking.”

“You’re right. The second Mrs. William Worth was out of the top drawer, right enough. Real, blue blooded county, she is, but her family are as poor as church mice. They say William lent her father a fortune and then asked for Vera to meet the debt. I’ve heard William Worth boasting here when he

was drunk that he'd show his two sons who was the better man by having children by his second marriage. He was bitter about the two of 'em being bachelors and having no children to inherit the works. They got very quarrelsome of late among themselves and very likely the whole family'd have broke up if William hadn't died when he did."

"When was that?"

"Last winter. Although he was turned seventy-five, the old man wouldn't stay away from the foundry and caught a chill through running from the hot rooms out into the yard and back. Turned to pneumonia and although you'd have sworn he'd pull through, judging from the look of him, he must have really undermined his strength with his drinking and he went out like a snuffed candle."

"So, his young wife hadn't long to wait for her dues?"

"No. She really put her money on the right horse, didn't she?"

"Do you know Miss Rickson; former children's nurse at the Hall, I think she was?"

"Sure. Everybody knows Miss Rickson. She's been in the town for getting on forty years. A smart woman in her prime...."

"So I would imagine. I met her this evening. She's now a pensioner I see."

"The family have always been devoted to her.... In fact, she's one of 'em in all but name. The only one of them who dared to stand up to old William and tell him where he got off. I do believe the old man was a bit scared of her. Made provision for her in his Will, I heard."

"She still looks upon the present generation of Worths as her children and fortunately seems to get on well with the late William's widow, too."

"She gave the old chap the length of her tongue, I believe, when he told her he was going to marry a youngster, but she seems to have got over it. At any rate, it didn't make her pack up and leave the Hall. She stuck it out there. I'll bet she could tell a tale or two about the carryings-on there've been at that house...."

"Very likely. But she won't talk. She's the faithful old retainer type and the rack wouldn't make her divulge the secrets of the family...."

The clock in the bar struck twelve rapidly and with apparent excitement.

"Well, Cairns. I think that's enough crime for one sitting. Mrs. Cairns'll be after my blood to-morrow if I keep you up longer.... Hullo ... late

customer.”

Someone was knocking on the outer door.

Cairns hurriedly left to investigate and returned accompanied by Inspector Kane, who looked as if he had run all the way from the police station, although, in fact, he had left his car at the door. His face was flushed with excitement and he took off his official cap and mopped his bald head with heavy dabbing motions.

“Hullo, Kane. Called for a quick one on the way home?” said Littlejohn.

Kane hadn’t much sense of humour and made shocked and deprecating movements with his hands, like an incorruptible refusing a bribe.

“No, no, sir. Something far more important than that. I’m on my way to Trentvale Hall.... Miss Rickson’s dead and foul play’s suspected. I thought maybe you’d like to run along with me, sir.”

“I certainly would, Kane. Thanks for calling. I’ll be with you in a jiffy....”

“You see, Miss Rickson doesn’t have the family doctor. They have a chap called Watterson; she has Cragg. She was friendly with Dr. Cragg’s wife, so I guess that’s how it was. Dr. Cragg’s the police surgeon, too. That’s how it happens I’m on the job so quick.”

They were on their way to the Hall and Kane was, in his usual laborious fashion, getting the whole tale off his chest.

“... Well, it turns out that Miss Rickson went to bed at her usual time to-night ... ten o’clock....”

“I called at the Hall and saw her earlier in the evening....”

“You did, sir? That’s most important, and useful for you, too. For, knowing her, like, you won’t need so much explaining from me....”

“Thank heaven,” thought Littlejohn inwardly.

“She generally took up a cup of chocolate, which one of the maids made for her, as a nightcap and then read in bed for, say, quarter of an hour, until she was sleepy....”

“Where d’you get all this from, Kane? You haven’t been to the Hall yet, have you?”

“No. I learned all this after the death of Mr. Henry. I went up there and got everybody’s movements in detail on the night of the crime. It’s proving useful now, isn’t it ...?”

“I congratulate you on your thoroughness, Inspector.”

Kane was a bit heavy, but not so sleepy as you'd think.

"H'm. At just after eleven, one of the maids, Clara, passed Miss Rickson's room and saw a streak of light showing under the door. She thought perhaps the old lady'd fallen off and forgot to switch off the bed lamp, so she'd do it for her. However, when she went in, Clara didn't like the look of Miss Rickson at all. She was breathing, but very laboured, like. Mr. Gerald was at home—in fact they all were—so they sent for Dr. Cragg. At a quarter to twelve, Miss Rickson died. Overdose of sleeping tablets. Cragg, who 'phoned me the story, refuses to believe that the old lady either made a mistake or took the dose deliberately. He says, in the first place, she's too careful; and in the second too sane to take her own life.... Here we are, sir. Now we'll soon know a bit more. Though why anyone should want to do-in a harmless old lady, I don't know...."

"The reason's probably not far to seek. You say she's a shrewd old lady. My impression of her was the same. She's probably laid her finger on who killed Henry and confronted them with it, thereby signing her own death warrant."

CHAPTER VI

CROSS CURRENTS AT TRENTVALE HALL

THE prevailing atmosphere at Trentvale Hall when the police officers arrived reminded Littlejohn of that on a football field just after the referee has blown the whistle for the line-up.

During Littlejohn's previous visit earlier that evening, the place and its inhabitants had an informal air. The family scattered about and taking their ease; the servants enjoying time off either in the town or in their own quarters.

Now, the whole was transformed. The Worths presented a solid phalanx against inquiring outsiders. Their retainers were all on duty, serious and formal and taking orders from the butler, who seemed to have shrivelled the forward ones into silent submission and firmly restored the hysterical members to sense and coherence.

This butler opened the door to the Inspectors. He reminded Littlejohn of a fat and ancient carp in a fishpond. Bald head, protruding watery eyes, roman nose and a chin which seemed one with his thick flabby neck. The skin of his cheeks hung loosely over his cheek bones and his lips, when at rest, looked pursed and ready for blowing smoke rings. His side view presented a lovely convex sweep from head to feet, embracing a great paunch. He seemed to swim along rather than walk, like a perpendicular fish using the two prongs of its tail as a means of locomotion.

The newcomers felt like schoolboys as they followed this huge mass into the house.

The place was cosy and well lighted, but cluttered up with Victorian furniture. The indescribable aura of death hung about the interior. Henry had been brought home that night and now there was Miss Rickson.

The flunkey led his charges into a large lounge in which the family were assembled. A log fire was burning in the huge open hearth, easy chairs were scattered all over the place, but nobody seemed easy enough to use them. They were all on their feet, like scholars who rise when the Head enters the room. Littlejohn noticed the unusual number of small tables standing about, as though someone had been preparing for a whist drive....

One person in the assembly was evidently unwelcome. Dr. Cragg. The family had expected him to give a death certificate on the strength of heart failure. Instead, he had declined and called in the police. As if they hadn't enough on their hands with Henry's body!

Cragg didn't seem to care, however. Some of the party had been reviving themselves with nice cups of tea; others with whisky. There were china and glasses on some of the tables. But Cragg had not been drinking. Either he had declined or, in wrath, they had ignored him. He was a tall, spare man apparently in the late forties. There was no nonsense about him. Probably that was why Miss Rickson liked him. He was dark, alert and well groomed, with a healthy red face and sharp, humorous brown eyes. He had a huge panel practice among the workpeople of the town and treated all his patients alike, as though they were paying maximum fees. At one time, the humbler section of the population of the valley had, through the channel of a deputation from the local labour party, informed him that they would see to it that he got to Westminster if he would put up as their M.P. But Dr. Cragg had replied that he could serve them better as a physician than as politician.

The doctor was fastening his bag when the officers entered. He had been ministering to Clara, the maid who had found Miss Rickson and who had fainted afterwards from shock.

“... but it's preposterous. I think we've every right to know....”

Littlejohn assumed that it was Gerald Worth who was complaining to the doctor, for he was the one of the family he hadn't already met.

“It's not incumbent on me to give you medical chapter and verse for my opinion, Mr. Worth. I'll do that to the coroner and the police. Suffice it to say that the dilated pupils and the mode of death are not indicative of heart trouble ...” Cragg was saying. “Ah, here are the police now. Evening, Kane....”

Kane introduced Littlejohn in general terms.

Normally, Gerald Worth would have been a pleasant fellow. He had a mop of crisp curly hair, effeminate large brown eyes, a rather weak face and a pleasant smile. He was tall and well built and the well cut suit he was wearing gave him a distinguished appearance. He had once fancied the stage in preference to engineering and bore the stamp of his inclination about his dress. His clothing came from Savile Row, albeit he insisted on a fashion of his own. The narrow cut of his trousers and the absence of turn-ups had recently brought him a minor triumph over his equals in the locality, for he had been able to bear the Board of Trade sartorial restrictions with equanimity.

When Littlejohn first encountered Gerald, however, he was petulantly trying to bully Dr. Cragg and might as well have beaten his head against the wall....

Vera Worth, too, was fully dressed in the riding habit in which Littlejohn had seen her at an earlier hour. She was standing, legs apart, in front of the fire, drinking whisky. She looked somewhat amused at all the fuss and seemed to be leaving it all to the doctor and Gerald.

The Count and his wife had apparently been in bed when the upheaval occurred, for they were in night attire with dressing gowns. Châteaulcœfs hair was disordered and he still looked half asleep. His monocle was screwed in its usual place, but his dignity was at a low ebb, for he looked to be suffering from a hangover. Alice, in a dressing gown of mannish cut, looked more like his nurse, for she kept regarding him apprehensively as though at any time expecting him to open his mouth and put his foot in it.

A clock in the hall struck one.

“... Well, it’s one o’clock. Let’s get done what must be done and then retire,” said Gerald ungraciously. “I suppose you want to question us all, although before we definitely know that Ricky didn’t die naturally, it all seems damned silly to me....”

Cragg shrugged his shoulders at Kane, who nodded sympathetically.

“I’m certain my autopsy to-morrow will confirm my provisional diagnosis,” said the surgeon.

“Very well now ... I’ll just take statements, brief ones, from you all, and then we’ll leave the rest till morning,” said Kane, rubbing his bald head with the flat of his hand in embarrassment. He had stood in awe of the

family nearly all his life and had to summon up his resolution to bring about his wishes. He turned to Littlejohn and muttered briefly.

“Yes. I’ll do that,” said Littlejohn. “Is Clara fit to be interviewed, doctor?”

“She’s in bed.... I was just going to give her a sedative when you arrived. Come along, we’ll give it her together, although I wouldn’t like you to worry her much now. Just an odd question or two won’t do her any harm, however....”

The butler was summoned and swam before them upstairs and to the servants’ quarters. They found Clara in a neat room, watched over by the cook, and wide awake.

“Well, Clara,” said Littlejohn. “Here we are again....”

The sympathetic greeting must have upset the stricken girl for she burst into tears.

Cook made soothing noises. “There there, lovey, don’t take on so,” and glared hard at the Inspector.

“There now, Clara,” answered Littlejohn, “I’ve only come up to see how you are. I’m here to help you, not upset you, so dry your tears, my dear.”

“I’m all right, sir, thank you very much. Silly of me to cry like that....”

“Well, the doctor’s got something to put you to sleep, so you can settle without worrying. First of all, though, he says I can ask you a few simple questions, then you won’t have them on your mind and I won’t need to bother any more. Do you feel up to it?”

“Certainly, sir.”

The doctor motioned the cook and the butler to leave them and closed the door behind their protesting backs.

“Now, I’ll be very brief. Miss Rickson went to bed at ten. You gave her her chocolate?”

“Yes, sir. It wasn’t really chocolate. That’s so hard to get on account of the war. It was sweetened cocoa....”

“Right, Clara. You made it?”

“Yes. At the same time as I made my own. I drank mine, too. So it couldn’t have been that that killed ‘er....”

Tears began to fall again. The maid had evidently taken to heart their previous conversation about the tea which poisoned Mrs. Worth’s dog.

“Don’t be upset, Clara. Nobody’s accusing you of anything. Just answer the questions and trust me.... How did Miss Rickson seem when she retired? I mean, was she her normal self?”

“No, sir. She seemed upset about something. After you left her, she went to see all the family, a thing she rarely does at that time of night.”

“She saw them all?”

“Yes. Mr. Gerald came in about ten minutes after you left, so she saw ‘im before she went to bed.”

“I see. Any idea what upset her?”

“No, sir. She didn’t say anything to me. I thought something you’d told her ‘ad made ‘er a bit excited.”

“You gave her her cocoa, then, about ten?”

“Yes, sir. She was then in bed. I put the tray on the table at the side. The cocoa wasn’t sweetened, so I put her some glucose in it from the sugar basin she keeps it in....”

“Glucose?”

“I prescribed that instead of sugar, Inspector,” interposed Cragg. “She was a bit feeble and it’s a greater energiser than ordinary sugar. She used it in place of sugar in her drinks.”

“So you gave her the glucose, Clara?”

“Yes, sir. She was sitting up in bed, reading a little book as she always does before she falls off, like....”

“Thomas à Kempis, Inspector ...” said the doctor.

“And did she say anything about taking sleeping powders?”

“No, sir. She has a bottle of tablets in her drawer. I know that because I’ve passed them to her once or twice when she’s been in bed and wanted them. But she hasn’t needed them since last spring, when she got run-down after the ‘flu....”

“That’s right, Clara,” confirmed Cragg.

“So you think, maybe she got up and took them after you’d gone?”

“Not to poison herself, sir. Never that. She was too religious to commit suicide and too wide awake to make a mistake and take too many. Besides, come to think of it, there were only five tablets in her bottle. I remember her saying she’d need a fresh lot from the doctor here if she was ever took sleepless again.”

“Well, thank you for your help, Clara, and sorry to disturb you after you’d got settled in bed, but the sooner we get all the facts, the quicker we’ll find out who did this to Miss Rickson. Hence the hurry. Now, I’m just going to ask you to be patient for another minute whilst I have a look in Miss Rickson’s room and then you can get to sleep right away....”

“Very good, sir. I’m most anxious to ’elp you.”

“I’m sure you are, Clara. The doctor has told me how you came to find Miss Rickson, so we’ll not wade through all that again now. Later, we’ll get you to sign a statement about it, but not now.”

Littlejohn and Cragg left the girl and the doctor led the way down a flight of stairs to Miss Rickson’s room. He produced the key and unlocked the door. It was a cosy little place, furnished as might be expected for one who belonged to another age and who had served the family most of her life. A modern wash basin with running water stood in sharp contrast to so many old-fashioned things. Framed photographs of children and family groups on the walls. A few text-cards hung here and there, as well as a profusion of calendars, probably sent by Ricky’s charges of days gone by. There was an armchair, too and a corner cupboard. The dressing-table bore a few toilet articles and two rings, a watch, ticking merrily, and a long jade necklace, just as the victim had placed them before she took to her bed for the last time.

Cragg opened the top drawer of a chest and produced the phial of sleeping tablets mentioned by Clara.

“I remember giving her these,” he said. He counted the contents. There were still five.

“So the fatal dose was brought from outside, doctor?”

“Looks like it.”

“The empty cocoa cup has been moved from the bedside table, I see.”

There was nothing on the table but a copy of *The Imitation of Christ*, previously mentioned by Cragg, and Miss Rickson’s gold framed glasses.

The sheet had been drawn over the body of Miss Rickson. Littlejohn turned down one corner and looked at the frail face, quiet and composed in death. He had seen plenty of corpses, untimely victims of brutality and crime, but few had filled him with greater rage at the thought of wanton and ungrateful destruction of a useful and innocent life. He replaced the coverlet.

“We were saying, the cup’s gone.”

“Yes, Inspector. I asked about it. It seems, Clara, with the instinctive tidiness of a good servant, took away the tray when she rushed off for help after finding Miss Rickson in distress. She dumped it on the table at the bottom of the stairs as she went to find Mr. Gerald and later put it in the kitchen to be washed in the morning.”

“And then ... I can guess what you’re going to say....”

“I told her to get it. It had been washed and put away. I’d some time to spare whilst I was waiting for you.... You can see that I’m not very popular with the family. I’m not their doctor and they seem to think that I should have signed a death certificate just because they’re the Worths.... However, we weren’t very matey whilst waiting for you to arrive so, to pass the time, I tried to find out who’d washed the cocoa cup ... it was a beaker to be precise. Nobody knew. Bancroft, the butler, asked all the servants. No. They’d gone to bed. It was customary to do the late night’s dishes first thing the day after. And I shocked the family by asking *them* which of them had been in the kitchen and done it! They all denied it like mad.”

“Thanks, doctor. That’s saved me a bit of trouble. It also gives us a pointer as to how the deed was done. Somebody doped the cocoa. But Clara apparently took it straight to Miss Rickson after she made it. *And* she had a cup for herself from the same packet apparently.... So the packet couldn’t have been doctored. Wait a minute, didn’t Clara say something about putting sugar in ... or rather glucose. Where’s the sugar basin Clara mentioned?”

The doctor seemed to know all about Miss Rickson’s room. He opened a corner cupboard and produced a china ornament bearing the crest of the town and the superscription, “A Present from Brighton.”

“Here we are, Inspector. You’re thinking that the poison might have been put in here with the glucose and then Clara put it in the cocoa.... H’m.... Very likely. Everybody knew about Miss Rickson and her little pot of sugar. It was a bit of a family joke. Pinch Ricky’s hoard when the ration runs short, kind of thing.”

Cragg examined the contents of the dish, about a tablespoonful in the bottom of it. He moistened the tip of his finger, dipped it in and gingerly tasted the stuff.

“Seems all right to me,” he said, smacking his lips. “... Wait a minute.... This isn’t glucose.... It’s castor sugar. Now, what the ...”

“Don’t you see, doctor? Somebody put the drug in the glucose; Clara gave it to Miss Rickson. Then, after Miss Rickson started to be ill and Clara left her to get help, the murderer came here, sneaked the poisoned stuff away and substituted untainted sugar, forgetting or not knowing that the original stuff was glucose, not sugar....”

“We’d better get back to Clara, Inspector. She’s been waiting far too long.”

They locked the room and returned to the maid.

“You’re sure it was glucose you put in Miss Rickson’s cocoa to-night, Clara?” asked Littlejohn.

“Oh yes, sir. It has a different way of dissolving than sugar. Sort of forms a soggy lump before it goes to the bottom, instead of vanishing into the liquid like sugar.”

“You’re a very bright girl, Clara, and I’m much obliged to you.”

“Just one more thing I remembered, sir,” said the maid, as they prepared to leave her. “When I left Miss Rickson with her cocoa, she asked me your name. She’d forgotten it and so had I. She said she wanted to see you again to-morrow.”

“Dear me. You know it now, Clara. It’s Littlejohn....”

“But it’s too late now, sir, isn’t it?”

Thereupon the doctor rang down the curtain on Clara’s troubled day by giving her a sleeping draught.

CHAPTER VII

THE MOVEMENTS OF THE WORTH FAMILY

WHEN Littlejohn and Cragg re-entered the lounge they found the atmosphere much less tense.

Kane had apparently finished catechising the Worths and was now seated in an easy chair and chatting sociably. A glass of whisky and soda stood at his elbow.

Littlejohn knew exactly what had happened. Local gentry of the Worth type had two main weapons in their armories. Intimidation and charm. They had turned on the charm for Kane's benefit and here he was, basking like a cat in the hot sun.

“Ah ...” said the local Inspector by way of greeting to his Scotland Yard colleague. There was a wealth of meaning in that monosyllable. See how I get on with the local bigwigs. Got 'em eating out of my hand.

“Ah.... I got the statements of these ladies and gentlemen, Inspector Littlejohn, while you were upstairs and, if you agree, I don't think we need trouble 'em much more to-night. It's getting late, isn't it?”

Littlejohn had no wish to get at cross purposes with his collaborator, but felt it inadvisable to let things rest as they were. He drew Kane aside and told him the result of his inquiries among the servants. Kane nodded his head sagely and looked full of alcoholic gravity. He breathed a blast of whisky over Littlejohn which betrayed the fact that the present glass wasn't the first.

“My colleague from Scotland Yard has discovered one or two fresh points during his interview with Clara, the maid, and would like to have a little more information ... Sorry to trouble you further....”

Kane addressed Gerald Worth, but it went for the rest.

The Trentbridge Inspector handed over to Littlejohn the notes he had made whilst interviewing the family. No wonder he had found favour in their eyes! His examination had been a model of brevity and the results covered a mere page and a half of his notebook.

<i>Miss Rickson</i> retired:	10.00 (given cocoa by Clara.)
Reading in bed	10.30 (presumed from habit.)
Clara enters and finds Miss R. is ill	11.00
Miss R. dies	11.45

Mr. G. Worth

Arrived home from works after meal in canteen	9.15
Washed and joined Mrs. W. Worth at supper	9.45
With Mrs. W. Worth and Count and Countess	9.45 to 11.00 (making arrangements for funeral of Mr. Henry.)

Count and Countess de C.

Home	8.15
Supper with Mr. G. and Mrs. W.	9.45
With Mr. G and Mrs. W.	9.45 to 10.30 do.
Retired to bed	10.30

Mr. Gerald W. and Mrs. William W. together all evening after 9.45 till alarm re Miss Rickson. Count and Countess also until they retired at 10.30.

Then followed a few notes on the reactions of the various parties on hearing of Miss Rickson's distress and death. Sleeping tablets were also stated to be of easy access in a bathroom cabinet. Kane had collected the bottle and had it in his handkerchief for fingerprinting.

Kane had got it all pat. All the family were out of it on the strength of the alibis they'd given each other. The poisoner must be among the servants. Littlejohn's pigeon! Those below stairs had been left to him.

The family watched Littlejohn anxiously as he conferred with his fellow officer. The charm they had been exerting over Kane was wearing thin.

“Well, what is it now?” asked Gerald impatiently.

“Further information concerning the mode of Miss Rickson’s death has made it necessary for me to ask you all a few more questions,” said Littlejohn. “In my opinion, Miss Rickson was poisoned by the mixing of sleeping powder with the sugar in a small basin she kept for sweetening her nightly cup of cocoa, which was taken in bed. To-night, Clara sweetened the drink, but the contents of the sugar bowl were afterwards removed by someone and replaced by untainted sugar. The question therefore arises of alibis *after* death. In other words, who was in the room after Miss Rickson was given the poison? Furthermore, who washed and put away the empty beaker which had contained the poisoned cocoa after Clara left it in the kitchen?”

The family looked flabbergasted.

“You surely don’t think one of us would have done such a beastly trick on poor old Ricky?” said Alice.

“On the way downstairs I inquired of the servants concerning their movements,” replied Littlejohn. “The butler and the cook support each other’s statements that they have not been near Miss Rickson’s room all the evening, nor did they venture there after they heard she was ill. Clara, of course, has been in and out several times. Bertha, the other maid, is away for the night attending, I understand, at her sister’s confinement. The pantry boy goes off the premises at ten and sleeps at the lodge, kept by his sister....”

“So, the family’s suspect, eh?” came from Gerald.

“I suspect nobody yet, sir. But perhaps you’ll all be good enough to supplement the details of your movements given to Inspector Kane a short time ago. It’s necessary for us to have particulars up to the time the doctor arrived and took charge.”

Kane had, to ensure independent evidence, taken testimonies at a small table in one corner of the large room. To this, the detectives again adjourned and the family followed one by one.

The next lot of time schedules presented a different picture from Kane’s innocuous figures.

Each of the parties had been separately in Miss Rickson's room during her sudden illness.

Gerald had hastened up on hearing from Clara what had occurred and remained there alone until Vera arrived. He had then left Vera alone whilst he telephoned for Cragg. The Count and Countess, roused by the commotion, had gone together to see if they could help and Vera had left them with only Miss Rickson for company whilst she went to the kitchen for hot water bottles.

"So you were in the kitchen?" Littlejohn asked Vera.

She knew what he meant, but had her answer.

"Clara was there when I arrived," she replied with a sly smile.

Any of them could have washed out the sugar basin at the washbowl in Ricky's room. But they would have needed to come prepared with a fresh supply of sugar. Easily carried in a small bottle or bag.

"Who had access to Miss Rickson's bedroom and the sugar cupboard during the day?" Littlejohn had asked.

Everybody. The door was never locked. All of them knew of the sugar basin. It was a family joke....

"And by the way," Alice said. "It was glucose, not sugar, she kept in the dish. Doctor's orders."

"Well. We don't seem to be getting any forrader. I'm going to bed."

It was Vera, the trace of a smile still hanging round her lips, making a move towards the door.

A stubborn flush covered Kane's face. They'd made a bit of a fool of him once. He wasn't having any more of it.

"Please remain until Inspector Littlejohn has finished, Mrs. Worth," he said firmly.

Vera came to a full stop, regarded Kane with astonishment, seemed about to protest, and then thought better of it and sat down on a chair near the door.

"There's just one more point on which we want a little light before we call it a day," continued Littlejohn. "What was Miss Rickson doing between a quarter to nine when I left her and ten o'clock when she retired? I believe she saw various members of the family. Will any of you who saw her kindly tell me what was on her mind?"

"She came in the dining room...."

It was the Count breaking silence for the first time. Hitherto, he had been standing about, goggling, leaving it all to the others and especially his wife, and confirming statements by a nod of the head or a grunt. His monocle looked to have grafted itself on his cheek. He had drunk too much. Now he seemed to realize that some contribution was due from him.

“She came in the dining room....”

He stopped suddenly. The eyes of all the family turned on him. They looked as if they could have strangled him.

“I think I can complete the sentence,” interjected Littlejohn. “She came into the dining room to ask if any of you could tell her my name. She had some information she wanted to give me.”

The Worths looked more bewildered than ever. Their looks gave their answer.

“... But she had already spoken to some of you individually before that. I would like to add to your testimonies what she had to say.”

One by one the family retired with Littlejohn to the table on which reposed the sheets of official notes.

Gerald was very off-hand in his manner. He was as petulant as a child who has stayed up past his bedtime.

“Miss Rickson asked me outright if I’d killed my brother,” he said. “I told her not to be silly. She pressed for a yes or no. I said no, of course. She seemed glad. Why she should have thought I’d done it, I can’t think. But, you’d apparently interviewed her before I got home and set her imagination going, Inspector. I hope you didn’t tell her I’d done it....”

“Did she ask you anything else, sir?”

“Something about Vera’s lapdog being poisoned. I told her I didn’t know what she was talking about. She was at it, too, about Vera’s gun accident. I thought she’d got bats in the belfry ... I told her to go and get a good night’s rest....”

“Nothing more?”

“No. Am I expected to say something else?”

“Thank you, sir. No.”

Alice and the Count were next. They stuck together like the heavenly twins, each the complement of the other.

Miss Rickson, it seemed, had asked them exactly the same questions as she’d asked Gerald and had received equivalent answers. Nothing

satisfactory.

Vera came last.

“She asked me something about my dog being poisoned a few weeks ago. I told her that it was the first I’d heard of it,” she replied to Littlejohn’s question with a yawn.

“Anything more, Mrs. Worth?”

“Oh yes. She also talked about my gun bursting being more by design than by accident. Had *you* been putting such ideas in her head?”

“Was that all, madam?” replied Littlejohn ignoring Vera’s own question.

“Nothing more that I can remember....”

In the nearby hall a telephone bell rang. The butler entered and said it was for Dr. Cragg. A confinement in the working class quarter of the town.

Had the accouchement been a royal one, Cragg could not have been more expeditious in getting under weigh.

“I’m off right away....”

“We’ll come, too,” said Littlejohn.

A constable had arrived to keep watch in Miss Rickson’s room. There was nothing more to be done that night.

On the way down in the police car, Kane asked his colleague what he thought about it all.

“The family had talked it all over before we arrived, Kane. We can look for no help there, in spite of the fact that we’re trying to find out who killed Henry and an old family servant. They think the Worths ought to be above suspicion and reproach and they resent our intrusion.... They’ve closed the ranks. Someone’s in for a shock at Trentvale Hall before long.”

CHAPTER VIII

THE OPINIONS OF MR. SILAS CAPPER

EARLY the following morning Littlejohn was at the office of Mr. Silas Capper, County Coroner of Trentshire, who had not only conducted the inquest on Henry Worth and adjourned it, but who was also, very conveniently, family lawyer to the Worth family.

Mr. Capper was tall and extremely thin and he had a long cadaverous face with a moustache, white and nicotine stained, draped across his upper lip and hanging down despondently almost to his chin. He wore trousers of an extremely narrow cut in the leg, a black morning coat, which had seen better days, and a shirt with stiff cuffs and front topped by a high collar, which totally enclosed his long, stringy neck.

It might have been thought that this eccentric looking object in his Sunday-go-to-meeting attire would have acted and thought in keeping with his appearance, but the Inspector found him far from stiff and starchy; on the contrary, he was most courteous and obliging.

“Another adjournment, I suppose,” said Mr. Capper referring to the death of Miss Rickson:

“Almost certainly, sir. Probably Inspector Kane has already told you there’s little doubt about its being murder there, too.”

“Yes. Kane called at a very early hour. I’ve been fire-watching over night and he must have spotted the outer door was open. He reported the death, but I didn’t let him expand on it. I wanted my breakfast.... He’ll be turning up with a full tale in about half an hour. I want to pop into the barber’s for a shave before he arrives, too, So don’t you keep me long, will you?”

“Would you like me, too, to call later, sir?”

“No, no. Only my joke. This business of Miss Rickson looks serious to me. The family’s definitely under suspicion in this case, I suppose.”

“We can hardly avoid thinking one of them did it, sir. As far as I can see, Miss Rickson must have discovered something dangerous about Mr. Henry’s death and paid the price for it....”

“A bad business, indeed.”

Encouraged by a cordial reception and the immediate realisation that Mr. Capper possessed a sense of humour, Littlejohn asked the solicitor point-blank for particulars of Mr. Henry’s Will.

Mr. Capper made no bones about giving the information.

“He left £20,000,” said the Coroner. “The Will was quite a simple one. He left the lot in trust with income for life to his sister, Alice. That, I take it, was to prevent the Count from laying his idle hands on the capital. Oh, yes ... he’s a real Count! As the late William Worth’s legal adviser, I investigated his title to the doubtful honour. Member of an impoverished French family. Old William made sure of that before he called him ‘Count.’ He was like that, was the old man.”

“What happens to the trust when the Countess dies, sir?”

“Capital passes to the local cottage hospital, lock, stock and barrel.”

“And Mr. Gerald?”

“Not a cent. Henry transferred a block of Worth shares, enough to give his brother a sound interest in the Company, last year when the capital was increased. I guess he thought he’d treated him well enough without leaving him cash as well. Henry was always fond of Alice and she of him. She’s not very well off, you know. Her father did a shabby trick in leaving her waiting for Vera to die. And the Count’s a definite liability, although Alice thinks the world of him. I suppose Henry wanted to put things right for her in the event of his death.... He was good to her in his lifetime.”

“I know, sir, that as family solicitor, you’ll be reticent in talking about their affairs, but I’d be grateful for any hint or information which might help me with the job on hand....”

“I like your way of putting it, Inspector,” said Mr. Silas Capper, smiling and laying bare a set of long, tobacco stained teeth. “But there’s little I know of any help, except what came out at the inquest, of which you have, no doubt, already received a full account.”

“Yes, I have sir.”

“Quite a number of people might have profited by Henry’s death. I wouldn’t put it past the Count, for one. He knew of Henry’s Will, because

Henry told Alice about it when he made it. The manner of death always struck me as strange. A funny business altogether."

"In what way, sir?"

"Somebody found Henry in the engine house or lured him there. Then, they turned on the gas or had it on already, locked the door and left him to die. I know that several of the men at the works objected to Henry's ways with their girls and perhaps some of them, in hot blood, might have wanted to do him violence. But they'd just have gone for him, told him to put up his fists and knocked hell out of him. To gas him wasn't the method of the average working man. It strikes me as being a cunning form of killing, such as might be used by a ninny ... you know, one who shudders at physical violence like fisticuffs, knifing, shooting or strangling. It's a soft way. It might even be called a woman's way...."

"A very interesting theory, sir, and one to be borne in mind. Incidentally, do you know anything about the Worth family quarrels? Are you aware of there being any lately?"

"Nothing unusual. Henry and Gerald fell out sometimes and had high words. You've met Gerald?"

"Yes; last night when we called at the Hall after Miss Rickson's death."

"He's an interesting type. Oxford man, you know. Bit of a dreamer. Don't know how he's going to get on now without Henry. If I know Gerald, he's hardly likely to kill his brother for any reason whatever. Certainly, not the sort to gas him, for, in spite of his impractical and lackadaisical ways, Gerald's a damned good boxer—or was. Nearly got his Blue for it, in fact."

"A strange mixture."

"Yes, he is."

"As regards Mrs. William Worth, is there any truth in both the sons being in love with her?"

"Hullo, somebody put you wise on that point already. I don't know how far Gerry went. He had more regard for the proprieties than Henry. Not likely that he'd make a public exhibition of himself, like Henry did. Gerald would carry on a secret intrigue if he wanted her. Henry, however, was a well known philanderer. He took his new stepmother around quite a bit at one time, but the thing dropped after the old man died. I think Henry and Vera must have squabbled about the inheritance. He's had several other lights of love since that affair."

“There’s another point which interests me, sir. Where do Vera Worth’s own family come in in this picture? I’m told they’re county people fallen on evil days....”

“Yes. A very well known and respected family, the Underhills of Glynn, about seven miles west of here. Colonel Underhill’s still alive and hearty, although bad luck has made him a shadow of what he was. He has two daughters and a son. They were a very happy lot until the Colonel’s wife died. He seemed to go all to pieces then. Neglected his business, let the estates go to rack and ruin, and started drinking heavily. Eventually, he pulled himself together, but couldn’t retrieve what he’d lost without outside help....”

“So, William Worth arrived ...?”

“Exactly. Old William lent Underhill money against mortgages of the estates until he’d got him where he wanted him. Then he asked Vera to marry him. He chose the right moment, for she’d just had an unlucky love affair and took William for spite. I drew up the marriage settlement, which, in effect, cleared the Underhill estate of the debts it owed to William Worth....”

“What happened to the son, sir?”

“The Colonel rescued enough from the wreck to send him out to Kenya and there he was when Vera married old Worth. Young Stanley, that’s the son’s name, came home when war broke out and joined up. Vera was his particular favourite and he played merry hell when he found out what had happened and that she’d been sold to an old man.”

“Where is Stanley now?”

“Stationed somewhere down south, I believe.”

“I see. And the father ... the Colonel ... what has his attitude been towards the Worths? How did he tolerate the marriage to William?”

“It quite broke him up for a time. But Vera, intent on cutting off her nose to spite her face, seems to have insisted on its going on. There were one or two hellish rows between old William and Colonel Underhill towards the end. The Colonel had pulled himself together, as I said, and I suppose regarded himself as responsible for his daughter’s marriage and thought that it was up to him to see that she got the best of a bad bargain....”

“So there was enmity there, too?”

“Yes ... but it died out after William’s death, I believe. Old Underhill never visits Trentvale Hall, but Vera goes over to see her dad quite a lot now. She’s independent once more and is her own mistress, you see.”

“Yes. I’m glad you’ve mentioned this connection. It throws open a new avenue altogether. I must call on Colonel Underhill, I think. You see, the old gentleman or young Stanley might easily have a hand in the Worth family mystery. If Vera was suffering at the hands of the Worths, Lord knows what her kith and kin might do for her, especially if they were closely knit and fond of each other, as I gather they are.”

“They are a very united lot ... or were until their trouble. Now they’re reviving the old bonds I suppose.”

“What about the other sister?”

“She married the fellow with whom Vera was in love.... That was at the root of all the bother. She lives somewhere in Scotland, I understand. Happily married and reconciled to Vera, that is if ever they *did* quarrel about it, which I doubt.”

The old gentleman rose to his feet and held out his hand to Littlejohn. He had smoked cigarette after cigarette during the interview and the front of his coat and waistcoat were smothered in ash, which he flicked off casually, merely rubbing in the grey powder instead of removing it.

“I’m never going to get my whiskers off if I don’t get a move on, Inspector,” he said, giving his visitor a hearty handshake and putting on a bowler hat of ancient design. “If your colleague Kane wants me in the next ten minutes, he’ll have to sit in the next chair at the barber’s. Goodbye.... Call and see me again when I can help.”

And with that the coroner waved a jaunty hand and went off for a shave.

CHAPTER IX

AMONG THE WORKMEN

“THE only persons I met between the police station and well past Worth’s was a couple o’ drunks, habituals that I know well, and a party o’ girls on their way home from Butler’s Riding School.”

Littlejohn had arranged to pick up Kane on his way to the Worth Works, but when he called at the police station, he found the Inspector absent in search of Mr. Silas Capper. The Scotland Yard man therefore filled in the waiting time in conversation with P.C. Warman, who had greeted Mr. Henry just before the crime and hence had probably been the last person to see him alive.

There were several huge and portly constables in the Trentbridge force who looked as though they had been poured into the same mould. Warman was the biggest and heaviest of the lot and at the annual police sports the tug-of-war team which had him as end man always won with effortless ease. His fat cheeks, snub nose and slightly slanting eyes gave him the look of a benevolent Chinese household god. He could throw very little light on the strange events of the night of Henry’s murder. He remembered greeting the victim in the dark and continuing his patrol without stopping. No, there was nobody about the works that he could hear at the time he passed. In fact, it was a very quiet night.

Oh yes, he always passed Worth’s at the same time every night when he was on duty. You see, he met the sergeant at midnight just at the corner of St. Chad’s church, a minute’s walk away from where Mr. Henry was standing. Mr. Henry was always there at the same time when it was his turn for firewatching. He’d talked about it to the men at the works, what a methodical man Mr. Henry was. Worked to a schedule, so to speak. Always at the door of the shop for a smoke and a breath of fresh air at midnight,

before he turned in. Anybody wanting to make a rendy-voo with Mr. Worth 'ad only to look up his name on the firewatching list and he'd be sure to find him on the spot at twelve.

This time he'd had a rendy-voo with death, hadn't he?

"Riding School? What were they doing there at that time of night?" said Littlejohn.

"Well, you see it's this way, sir. O'Grady who manages the place for Butler, runs a sort o' social club there. There's a big room over the stables that he's poshed up and he has a gramophone set up, so when the girls and their fellows come in after riding, they can go up for a bit of jazz. All straight and above board and seemingly fillin' a long felt want, as you might say. No drinks served, o' course, but there's a pub nearby which does the needful till closin' time. They usually break up the parties about midnight. It was a crowd o' girls from there as I see, sir. I know they was from there because I could make out their riding 'abits."

"I see. Anything else, Warman?"

"No, sir. Sorry."

"Don't apologize...."

Inspector Kane hustled in, talking angrily to himself.

"Havin' a shave, indeed. Must think I've all day to be hangin' around his office. He'll have to wait...."

"Been hunting for Mr. Capper, Inspector?" said Littlejohn with a grin. "I parted company with him at the barber's."

"Yes, and he's still there. Must think I've nothing to do but mess about for him. Mr. Henry's funeral's at two o'clock and the men we want to interview will be going from the works.... So we'd better be getting along, hadn't we ...? Havin' a shave, indeed!"

They found Worth's a hive of industry and in passing through the various shops on their way to the offices, where they were to meet Gerald Worth again, Littlejohn was amazed at the air of stern preoccupation prevailing among the workers. They felt their responsibility towards the forces they were serving and were carrying on with intense zeal. Loud speakers scattered about the place gave Music While You Work. Everything ran with machine-like precision. Men and women hard at it and leaving the tasks in hand grudgingly when called away.

Hollas, who had found the body, was interrupted in his task of supervising a roomful of girls engaged in making aeroplane parts. He was busy testing something with a micrometer and laid down the gauge with reluctance.

They might as well have left him at his job, for he could tell the police nothing which he had not already revealed at the inquest. He had grown impatient waiting for Mr. Henry to return to his tea and had sought him out, only to find him gassed.

“Did you usually make tea for him, Mr. Hollas?”

The foreman scratched his bald pate and nodded his head.

“Aye. He liked a good cup o’ tea, did Mister Henery.”

“Always at the same time?”

“Regular as clockwork when we was firewatchin’. The rota of duties brought us together quite a lot. A few minutes before twelve, the boss always left his room, walked through the shop for a breather, and smoked a cigarette in the open air. If he hadn’t turned up at that time, we’d have thought somethin’ had gone wrong. As a matter of fact, we always make tea, those of us who’re awake, at midnight. Now Mr. Henery’d got used to it and sort of came through the shop to let us know ‘e was ready for his drink before sleep. That’s the way I figure it, anyhow.”

“H’m. Ever find anybody prowling round the premises, Mr. Hollas?”

“Just a few kids pinchin’ coal from the yard now and then. Nothin’ else.”

“And Mr. Henry didn’t seem in any way disturbed in his mind that night?”

“No. Did a lot o’ blinking his eyes, as he always did, because, as a rule, he did close work in his room when he was firewatching.”

“Very good, thanks, Mr. Hollas.”

Llewellyn Evans, the engineer, was the next man to be sent for. He was small, wiry and he had shifty eyes like sloes.

“Indeed, gentlemen, you’ll have to make it short, this interview, look you,” he said in sing-song Welsh-English. “The bearings of my engines are very hot, indeed they are, and that means I shall have to work on them tonight. And in the meanwhile, I need to look to them, or else we shall have the whole shop standing idle....”

“Very well, Mr. Evans. Just a couple of questions and you may go,” said Littlejohn, interrupting the spate of rapid and precise language. “I’ve

already seen your gas engine. Apparently the valve which was thrown open and filled the place with gas, was easy to manipulate to anyone who knew of it....”

“Indeed, it was. Look you, a child could have done it....”

“Are all the workmen conversant with the engine ...?”

“Indeed, they are not. Nobody but those authorized by Llewellyn Evans are allowed to tamper with his engines....”

“I’m not talking about tampering. I mean, had everyone access?”

“They had not. Working or idle, the engine houses are always under lock and key. Only me and my assistant are allowed access to the engines and motors. That is, unless they are under repair or cleaning. Even then, one of the two of us is there with the rest.”

“The doors are kept locked, then?”

“Indeed they are, unless one of us is in the engine house. “I have one master key, my assistant the other, and the third was with Mr. Henry, who, with Mr. Gerald, of course, could come and go anywhere he pleased.”

“Your key does not leave your possession, Mr. Evans?”

“No, it does not. It is on my bunch of keys and I carry it wherever I go, for the key to my front door is also on the same ring.”

“And your assistant?”

Mr. Evans turned to a passing apprentice.

“Percy, boy, go you and tell Wilfred Booth to come to me this minute.”

Mr. Evans’s deputy turned out to be an older man than his master but was completely under the fiery Welshman’s thumb. He spoke in monosyllables, as if Evans had completely deprived him of powers of coherent speech. Long, lean, with sunken cheeks and a torn-looking moustache he gave the impression of being held together by his overalls.

The engineer displaced Littlejohn from his role as questioner.

“Wilfred, boy, where’s your key to the engine houses?”

“Pocket,” replied Wilfred.

“You always keep it there, yes?”

“Aye.”

“Do you ever part with it, Wilfred lad?”

“No.”

“And what might you do with it when you change into your other suit?”

“Ah change key into th’ same suit,” replied Wilfred in his longest effort. He did not question Evans concerning the rigmarole. He knew that his master had in mind some purpose, which he did not challenge, and after being dismissed, wiped his perspiring face on a piece of oily rag and departed in a docile manner.

“The door was open and a key in it when the body was found, Mr. Evans,” resumed Littlejohn.

“Then the key must have been Mr. Henry’s.”

Kane handed Evans a key.

“Recognize it, Evans?”

“Mister Evans to you, Inspector Kane.”

“Mister Evans, then.”

“That is better. The key is indeed Mr. Henry’s. I made it myself. See the notch in the barrel. My mark, that is. When new locks were put on the engine houses, all fitted to the same key, but two keys only were supplied. I made another for Mr. Henry on his orders.”

“Didn’t the late Mr. William or Mr. Gerald have keys?”

“They did not. They knew better than to interfere with a good man at his work, although they knew how to stop and start the engines, but always borrowed my key. Mrs. William, too, and Miss Alice, they knew about the engines. Terribly interested in engines is everybody....”

“The women, too?”

“Yes, indeed. Both women have interested themselves in the works since we took on ladies here for the war work. Although Mrs. William has grown less keen since the death of the old man last winter. I must be going, or that Wilfred will be getting himself into mischief. A good boy, Wilfred, but short of initiative. Good day, gentlemen....”

“Just a minute, Mr. Evans,” said Littlejohn. “As a matter of routine I’d like to ask you where you were at midnight on the night of the murder of Mr. Henry Worth.”

Llewellyn Evans went off at the deep end. He reminded Littlejohn of Donald Duck in a rage.

There followed long, purple patches of incoherent Welsh and then the engineer broke into English again.

“... it is heretic I have been called by the Papists, a ranter by the Episcopalians, the breaker of my mother’s heart by my own father ... now it

is a murderer I am become. Indeed, some of you shall be made to suffer for this. Alderman Price-Jones, chairman of our diaconate and head of the Watch Committee of this town, shall hear from me concerning the irresponsibility of our police....”

“That will do, Mr. Evans,” said Littlejohn, damming the spate of chatter with a flick of his hand. Kane seemed to have gone down for the third time beneath the billows. “That will do. Nobody’s suggesting for a minute that you had anything to do with the death of Mr. Henry Worth. I am asking a routine question. Please yourself whether or not you answer it, but make up your mind which you’ll do. Then I can make up mine concerning whether you’re for, or against us in this investigation....”

“And what do you mean by that ...?”

“I mean, Mr. Evans, that several people are prepared to swear that you have been heard to say that, rather than allow Mr. Henry to lead your daughter into sin, you would kill him.... Don’t you think you’d better answer my question? If you’re in the right, you’ve nothing to fear, Mr. Evans. You ought to know that without my needing to tell you. You, a pillar of the church....”

Mr. Evans changed his tune. All his fire died away and he became a wheedler.

“Oh ... that. Come, come, Inspector *bach*, we all say things in the heat of the moment....”

“So your anger against Mr. Henry for his treatment of your daughter was a lot of hot air ...?”

“Indeed it was not! Show me the man who says so. It was true what I said. I would have killed him with these two hands, indeed, rather than have my Blodwen wantoning about the countryside with him. But I did not kill him.... I was far enough away from here at that time, indeed I was.”

“Well?”

“From ten until one o’clock on the night of Mr. Henry’s death, I was watching at the bedside of old Mr. Lewis, of the Chapel. Very ill was Mr. Lewis, though now on the mend. Very ill, indeed.... Watching and praying, I was, until the small hours. Dr. Cragg will bear witness to that ... present he was at the bedside until Mr. Lewis took a turn for the better after midnight....”

“That’s all I want to know, Mr. Evans. You’ve wasted a lot of your own time and mine by not telling me at once....”

“Wasting time, am I, Inspector *bach*?” Evans’s tone was sarcastic and slimy. “Wasting time, indeed. And what are the police doing? What are they doing? Answer me that, Inspector. Running here and running there, they are. Questioning innocent people of good repute, when all the time the guilt is plain....”

“Yes, Mr. Evans ...? Whose is the guilt?”

“I am not the one to point the accusing finger.... Indeed I am not. Let others cast the stone. But, Inspector, I would ask, if I was you, what was Mrs. William Worth’s brother, Mr. Stanley Underhill, doing hanging round this town half an hour before midnight ... half an hour before Mr. Henry was gassed to kingdom-come. Seen by Mr. David Thomas, postman, also of the Chapel, who met him prowling near St Chad’s as he was on his way back from the Post Office Home Guard drills.... Wasting time, was I ...?”

Mr. Llewellyn Evans thereupon broke into his native tongue again, turned on his heel, and vanished among the machines.

CHAPTER X

MOULDING SAND

THEY had to seek out Tenpenny, the only other firewatcher awake at the time of the crime. He was a moulder and they found him engaged in the moulding shop, impressing patterns in wet moulder's sand.

Tenpenny looked like a nigger minstrel, for his hands and face were covered in the grime of his craft. The whites of his eyes gleamed and his lips glowed bright red in contrast. He was engrossed in what he was doing and was reluctant to stop and talk. Very different from his mates in the dressing shop next door, who downed tools in great curiosity and crowded round the entrance.

The conversation was punctuated by the shrill whine of the machines and the grunting of the nearby polishing wheels.

Tenpenny had nothing to add to what the police had already recorded in his signed testimony.

Littlejohn, however, began intently to examine the sand in which the moulder was working.

“Interesting stuff....”

“Oh, I don't know, Inspector. I've worked in it a lifetime. Although there's good and bad sand, of course. A tradesman can tell by looking at it if it's tip-top stuff.”

“Could Mr. Henry tell?”

“You bet your life he could. Only a few days since, he stopped here on his way through to the dressing shop and picked up a handful. ‘This isn't usual quality,’ he says. ‘Oh, I don't know. I haven't noticed it any different,’ I says. ‘I tell you it's poorer,’ says the boss, ‘and I won't stand for it. I'll write to the suppliers.’ And he carried off a sample. Nothing come of it, of

course. I was right and you can't dictate to suppliers like you once did. There's a war on."

With a gesture of dismissal, Tenpenny again set to making his figures in the sand.

The Inspectors found Mr. Gerald in his office. His desk was littered with files in neat and tidy piles, looking as if they were just there for ornament or to deceive the visitor. Worth himself was rummaging among a lot of papers in a very preoccupied manner, but face upwards was the cross-word puzzle, half completed, of the daily paper, which told its own tale.

Gerald was either accustomed to idling away his time, or else, on account of Henry's forthcoming funeral, he couldn't settle down to work that day.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, trying to look very busy. "And what brings you here? Still on the track of Henry's killer?"

They told him that they were seeking information which owing to Miss Rickson's untimely death, they hadn't pursued last night.

Apparently he knew nothing about anything which interested the police. He had no knowledge about the engine house key, the dead dog, Henry's private affairs, his stepmother's business and he wasn't interested in Henry's Will, in the Count of Châteaulœuf, in Henry's enemies, or in theories concerning his brother's death.

In fact, Gerald Worth played delaying tactics, like the last man in at a game of cricket, who refuses to be tempted out of his ground or to do anything but stonewall the bowling.

Eventually, and as a signal that the interview was drawing to a close, Littlejohn asked Gerald the usual question.

"Where were you at the time of the crime, sir?"

Worth smiled with satisfaction.

"Oh, you can't pin it on me, Inspector. I was playing snooker at the club until well after twelve-thirty and a dozen or more chaps will confirm it. In fact, the police came to the club to tell me of the accident.... Eh, Kane?"

"That's right, Inspector Littlejohn. Quite a number of members confirmed that Mr. Gerald was playing from eleven until the news arrived," volunteered Kane. "But, it wasn't an accident, you know, Mr. Worth. It was murder."

"I still can't bring myself to believe it. Murder, here in Trentbridge! And my brother the victim...."

There was a knock on the door and a crowd of workmen appeared apparently either to air a grievance or ask for orders.

Gerald looked at the assembled company like a snobbish railway traveller entering his usual first class compartment and finding it full of rabble on a day trip.

The detectives made their exit.

“Mr. Gerald’s a snob, is he?”

“He is, sir and, unless things alter, he’s going to have trouble with the men. Mr. Henry had nothing of that in him, I *will* say.”

“I think Gerald knows more about this affair than he pretends, Kane. He’s probably shielding someone and I’ve a good idea who it is, too. Well, I’ll leave you here. I want to call on Dr. Watterson, just to check Mrs. William Worth’s alibi.”

“You’ve not far to go, Inspector. The house is just round the corner. Not a place I’d like to live in myself, all among the factories and slums of the town, but as most of the patients come from there, the doctor must live on their doorsteps, I guess. See you later.”

The doctor had just arrived in from a round of visits and his wife informed Littlejohn that he was washing before lunch.

“He won’t be long. Are you a patient?”

“Hardly,” answered the Inspector and he told the woman why he had called. She turned pale and seemed to set herself for an ordeal.

“Yes, Mrs. Worth called here about nine o’clock. I know it was that time, because evening surgery was just over and we were listening in to the beginning of the news. Miss Baker, the doctor’s lady assistant, was free, too, so we all made up a hand at bridge. She was here with us until one o’clock.”

Mrs. Watterson looked helplessly at the detective. She was, in social circles of the town, somewhat of a high ranker, used to being toadied to by the lower orders and to having her own way. A little, fair, fat woman of middle age, with bleached and waved hair, and lipstick making a violent red gash of her mouth. A shallow vessel, unable to cope with the serious things of life which she could not control by social standing or cash, and hence quite out of her depth in interviewing a police officer whom she could not intimidate.

“Did Mrs. Worth leave the house, even temporarily, during the time she was here?”

“She, she … oh no, Inspector.”

“Quite sure, madam?”

Mrs. Watterson’s shifty eyes flickered.

“I’m sure. Do you doubt my word?”

The door of the room opened and a worried looking man with a pomaded moustache entered. At the sight of Littlejohn he braced himself and assumed a professional manner with the dexterity of a theatrical quick-change artist.

“This is Inspector Littlejohn, of Scotland Yard, Leonard. He’s called to check where Vera was when Henry was … was killed.”

“And why, pray?” said the doctor, up in arms at once. “Surely Mrs. Worth isn’t suspect, officer.”

“No, doctor, but we have to make routine checks on all parties.”

“Well, she was here all the time. Never left us between nine and one that night. Does that satisfy you?”

“Yes, thank you. I may require that testimony in writing later, sir.”

“Very well. Is that all? I’m a busy man.”

“I won’t detain you, doctor. Is Mrs. Worth a patient of yours, sir?”

“What has that to do with you?”

“I assure you I merely ask the question in the interest of Mrs. Worth. She’s not been well of late, has she?”

Littlejohn didn’t know a thing about the past or present state of Mrs. William’s health, but, for his own purposes, sought to draw the doctor if he could.

“I see you’ve been quizzing around, Inspector, and know all about it. She *has* been under me of late. That is all I will say. There’s such a thing as professional secrecy. Even Scotland Yard knows that.”

Mrs. Watterson was anxious to put in her motto to show that she had recovered her poise.

“The doctor specialises in gastric ailments, Inspector,” she said, “and has many cures to his credit.”

“Be quiet, Emily,” said the doctor. “Please understand this, Inspector. I’m not bound to tell you anything....”

“That is all I want to know, thank you, doctor. But let me also warn you. Developments in this case might easily involve Mrs. Worth and her complaint. I’d advise you to think over her case and, if it causes you any uneasiness, let me know. You’ll get me at the local police station.”

“What the devil do you mean?”

“The police, too, have their secrets, doctor.”

“In that case, I’ll wish you good day,” said Watterson, now bristling and stamping his feet with rage. He rang the bell and told the maid to show the Inspector out.

The maid was young and good looking and more pleasant than her employers. On the doorstep, Littlejohn asked her a question which she immediately answered with a smile.

“Where does Mrs. Worth stable her horse when she calls here after riding, Lucy? Your name *is* Lucy, isn’t it?”

The girl simpered.

“No. Get away with you. It’s Bessie. She stables in the garage opposite. Used to be a horse cab place and still has a loose box or two for the gentry. It’s open all night for taxis, so that’s convenient for Mrs. Worth. Good morning, sir. I’ll be getting in a row if I’m seen gossiping with you.”

Littlejohn crossed to the garage and asked for the man on duty at the time of the crime. He was told that he wasn’t about, as he slept by day and was on the premises by night. But he spent a lot of the time when he should be in his bed in the taproom of the “Rose and Crown.” Sure enough, Littlejohn found the man he wanted gazing dejectedly into an empty pint pot at the pothouse recommended. A little runt of a fellow, with the face of a polecat and a withered, dissipated look. His legs were thin and bowed, as though he spent his life astride a horse. He was an ostler turned taxi driver. For the price of another pint, Diggs—that was his name—gave Littlejohn not only the information he sought, but his own lurid views concerning the town, everyone in it and, in particular, those who without rhyme or reason, managed to get petrol to waste in riotous living. In his opinion, the progress of the war demanded the abolition of private automobiles and the sole use of taxis, the drivers of which ought to be given supreme powers of refusing to be hired by all who were not helping in the national effort. Diggs kept thrusting his stubbly yellow face close to that of Littlejohn and breathing his foul breath upon him.

“Yah! I’d put some of ’em in quod, I would.... Wot was you sayin’?”

“I was asking you if Mrs. Worth called at your place between stablign her horse and taking him away the other night....”

The ostler leered.

“Course she did. Brought it in about nine o’clock; called to take ’im away about one. But she was in again seein’ if ’e was O.K. around midnight. O.K. me foot! As if I didn’t know why she called!”

“You know a thing or two, eh, Diggs?”

“Not ’arf. I knows a thing or two about *Lady* Worth. Stuck up snob who thinks blokes like me’s dirt.... Hot stuff, is Mrs. Almighty Worth. Didn’t know as I knew she was spendin’ the evenin’ with Dr. Watterson and dodged out abaht midnight pretendin’ to be anxious abaht ’er horse. A fine excuse. In and aht of the loose box she was, like a shot. ‘Jest to awsk if Roddy’s all right,’ she says and afore I can open me mouth, off she goes.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes, and thinks I don’t see what she’s at. She doesn’t go back to the doctor’s. Not ’er. She offs in the direction of St. Chad’s church. Oho, me fine one! I sez to meself. On the tiles, are yer? So I ’angs around the doorway keepin’ me eyes skinned. Sure enough, half an hour later, back she comes. *And* not alone. With ’er is a bloke in uniform ... an officer by the look of ’im. Couldn’t make ’im aht proper in the dark.”

“A pity that, but understandable.”

“They parts quite lovin’ like at the doctor’s door, and in ’er high and mightiness goes. Expect she tells the doctor and ’is lady she’s been givin’ me the round of the stables for not lookin’ after ’er ruddy horse proper....”

“That was about midnight?”

“Jest before St. Chad’s struck twelve, that ’ud be, and she stayed away till well arter it struck a quarter-past. I kep’ me mouth shut abaht it, like. Nothin’ to do with me who she meets and wot she does with ’er spare time....”

It evidently hadn’t dawned on the half soaked Diggs that Vera’s rendezvous with the man in uniform coincided with the time of Henry’s murder. Lucky for Littlejohn. Otherwise, Diggs might have been less expansive.

“How many veterinary surgeons are there in the town, Diggs?”

The ostler’s bleary eyes opened in astonishment at the question.

“You do ask some funny questions, guv’nor. We only ’ave one. Philips’s in the Market Square. Useter be two, but Mr. Light joined up when war broke out.”

Littlejohn had a job to shake off the little stableman, but eventually broke free and started on a fresh errand.

“Come on, Diggs, you’ve had enough for one sitting,” the landlord of the “Rose and Crown” was saying as the Inspector left.

The sound of their quarrelling could be heard all down the street.

CHAPTER XI

A CORPSE VANISHES

THE surgery, kennels, loose boxes and other appendages to the art of Mr. Murphy Philips, veterinary surgeon, surround a courtyard like that of a coaching inn and are reached from the street by a tunnel-like passage from which at any moment one might expect to come forth, with horns blowing, a four-in-hand or crowded mail coach.

After causing a number of dogs penned in kennels to bark savagely in concert or else to howl dismally, Littlejohn was informed by the kennel maid, a buxom wench in a smock which looked as though a turn at the laundry would do it a lot of good, that Mr. Philips was out on his rounds in the country and would not be back until after lunch. The Inspector thereupon left the maid to quieten the dogs and went back to the police station.

There he met Kane again and disclosed to that surprised officer his plans for the afternoon. Under cover of Mr. Henry's funeral and anticipating that the Hall would be completely deserted, he proposed to visit the spot indicated by Matthews, the gardener, as the site of the dog's grave and exhume the body.

"I called at the vet's on the way here, Kane," he said. "I was hoping to arrange for him to examine the body and make sure of the cause of death. Is Philips any good in that line?"

"Excellent, Inspector. He's the reputation of being a bit rough as a horse doctor, but he's got his head screwed on the right way. You can rely on him and his intelligence. But what's all the fuss about?"

"You've heard me talk about the death of this dog before, haven't you, Kane?"

“Yes. And I must confess that I thought you’d got a bee in your bonnet....”

“Just whilst I’m waiting for lunch time, let me tell you what I think of the case at present. My theory is that Henry Worth was killed by his stepmother, Mrs. William ...”

“What!... That’s a bit of a shock.... And yet, why should it be? She was the woman scorned, wasn’t she? But I didn’t think she’d go so far.... Sorry I interrupted. Go on, please.”

“I reckon she wasn’t so scorned as to murder Henry on that count.... No. She did it in self defence, in a manner of speaking. Let’s look at the facts in hand.”

“Self defence? You don’t mean they came to blows in the engine house.”

Kane’s expression was laughable. His eyes protruded in intense curiosity and his moustache thrust itself forth incredulously.

“No, no. Firstly, the method of murder suggested a woman. Very effective, yet calling for little physical effort. The trap is baited. In walks Henry. The trap closes ... and it’s all over bar the shouting.”

“Now I’ll tell you what I’ve found out since I arrived, Kane. Henry went out for his breather and a smoke as regular as clockwork at midnight every time he did fireguard duty. So, his murderer knew when and where to set the trap. Evans told us that Mrs. William knew how to manipulate the engine. The mechanical side of the business is therefore covered.”

“Vera Worth gave us an alibi. She was at the Wattersons’ from nine until one playing bridge. That’s not quite correct. The ostler at the garage opposite, where she stables her horse, says that just before midnight, she came from the doctor’s across to the stables on the pretence of seeing that her animal was all right. She didn’t stay a minute, but didn’t return at once to the Wattersons’ either. Instead, she made off in the direction of St. Chad’s church and returned with a man in uniform about quarter-past twelve. They parted at the doctor’s, and Vera went inside again. So much for the alibi. It looks very black for her....”

“We’ve enough for a warrant, I think, Littlejohn.”

“Wait a bit. Now, motive. Henry was trying to kill Vera. She got wise to it and killed *him*. From the maid who served morning tea on a certain day, I learned that the pet dog was poisoned by a drink of tea from a pot served up to Vera. Matthews, the gardener, had seen Henry pinching arsenic weed

killer from his stock. Vera was lucky. The incident opened her eyes to a number of things. One was the gun accident. The barrel of that gun wasn't stopped up with clay or earth, but with moulder's sand from the foundry. As a matter of fact, the soil round here contains very little surface clay; so Henry used the next best thing. This sand, although it sets fairly hard when it dries after moulding, didn't resist the charge of the gun sufficiently and merely split the barrel. When Vera fired it, it gave her a good shaking, instead of bursting properly and blowing her head off. You heard what Tenpenny said this morning. Henry took a sample away with him...."

"Well, I'll be damned! It all falls into place just like a puzzle, doesn't it? You've done a grand job, if I may say so."

"Not yet, Kane, thanks. That's mere theory as yet. We're quite a way from the end.... A good lawyer would make mincemeat of it all. We want tangible evidence."

"Of what kind?"

"We'd better make quite sure the dog was poisoned for a start. Then, I'll give Watterson a good shaking-up by facing him with the ostler's tale. There's another point about that doctor. He's been treating Vera Worth for gastritis, or I'm a Dutchman. His wife hinted as much in a slip of the tongue she made when I was there. It's not a long step between the symptoms of gastritis and arsenic poisoning. It looks as though Henry had been giving her arsenic for some time...."

"It does surely. What other proof do you want before we get to work?"

Kane was rubbing his hands with enthusiasm.

"I must try to find out whom Mrs. Worth met on the night of the crime. There may have been an accessory. Then, I'll face her with the alibi. By the way, how has the checking of the other alibis gone?"

"Quite good. Doctor Cragg and his patient, Lewis, have confirmed Evans's statement. He was there, watching and praying by the bedside until the small hours. As for Gerald, we've had confirmation of his statement from the club steward and two independent members, both of whom played billiards with him."

"I see. I'll just get along and have my lunch now. Then, if you like, we'll attend the funeral service at St. Chad's. I generally make a point of attending such gatherings. Gives one a chance sometimes of finding some personality there who might provide a missing link. After that, whilst the

mourners are still occupied, we might go up to the Hall and dig up the dog....”

“Right. Shall we meet here about two o’clock then?”

“Very good. I’ll be here.”

“There’s one more point on which I might be of help. The Wattersons. Young Bascombe, one of our constables, is walking out with Bessie, the doctor’s maid. I might ask him if he can get any information from her about the other night’s happenings. Also any little bits o’ gossip that might come in handy. What do you think?”

“Excellent idea. A discreet young chap, I presume?”

“Sure. He’ll go a long way and ... I suppose ... take Bessie with him. He’s got it bad, so won’t mind combining a bit of duty with pleasure. The Wattersons’ll be at the funeral. Bascombe can get cracking while they’re away.”

After his meal at the “Rod and Line,” Littlejohn was tempted to fall asleep from the sheer weight of food provided, but shook off his torpor when Cairns entered to inquire if he had enjoyed it.

“I say, Cairns,” said the Inspector in the course of conversation, “you seem to know most that goes on in the town. Who’s a man in uniform, an officer presumably, with whom Mrs. William Worth might be seen knocking around?”

“Her brother, I’d say,” replied Cairns without hesitation. “Major Stanley Underhill. Miss Vera and her brother were very much attached in the old days, sir. He’s over here now. Joined up when war broke out. He’d been living in Kenya, but came home straight away. Last I heard of him, he was in camp, somewhere near Leicester.”

“You knew him then?”

“Oh, yes. Until the Underhills lost their money, he used to be seen about Trentbridge quite a lot. Bit of a wild ’un in his youth, sir. Then, when his father straightened himself up a bit, he sent Stanley to Kenya. Probably to cool off ... sort o’ remittance man. But I hear he’s nice and steady now and well liked by his men in the Trentshires.”

“I see. Has he been on leave lately?”

“That I can’t say, sir.”

The funeral service at St. Chad’s was a depressing affair. The church itself was damp and dismal and a lugubrious vicar with a catarrhal voice

and droning delivery added to the general gloom. The body of the place was filled with workpeople, many of whom had attended in their working clothes. When the service ended they went back to their machines. Henry was borne on the shoulders of six foremen of varying heights, who trod an uncertain and rather precarious course to and from the hearse at the church and cemetery.

The grief of one good looking young lady attracted Littlejohn's attention. When he asked who she was, he was told that she was Miss Bartlett, the late Mr. Henry's private secretary. The Inspector made a mental note to have a talk with her about Mr. Henry's affairs when her demonstrative sorrow had subsided.

Beyond that, the visit to the church yielded nothing towards the solution of the case. Littlejohn hurried away before the end of the dreary service, for the women, who were not going to the interment, would probably return to the Hall afterwards. Before they got there, Littlejohn hoped to have dug up and carried off the dead dog.

Kane and a constable accompanied the Scotland Yard man to the spot in the gardens indicated by Matthews as the place where he had buried the body. They took a spade in the car and carried a sack for the spoils of their bodysnatching. They had no intention of asking permission or of letting anyone else into the secret.

They found the place without much difficulty, for the turf under the tree had been neatly cut by whoever had done the original job and had not properly knitted together. The constable inserted the blade of his spade, lifted away the sods in a piece and set about the soil underneath. This was loose and bore evidence of recent disturbance.

The three men grew more puzzled with each spadeful of earth. At length, the policeman reached a stout root of the tree, but there was no sign of the dog's body.

"Seems to me as if somebody's bin 'ere afore us, sir," said the bobby, leaning on the handle of his spade and mopping his streaming forehead and neck. He had been working like mad to create a good impression.

"No doubt about it," replied Littlejohn. "The body couldn't possibly have been inserted under the root without a lot of useless labour. And yet, I'm sure this is the place. Not only because the old man showed it me, but because of the signs of recent disturbance. We've been beaten to it! We're

up against somebody who knows more of what's in our minds than we think. Right, then, Poole. Fill in the hole and put the turf carefully back. Then we'd better be off before the mourners return."

It did not take the constable long to set things to rights again. They returned somewhat chagrined to the police station. The sergeant in charge had a message for Littlejohn that the veterinary surgeon had rung up and would like a word with him.

"Get me the number then, will you, please?"

Mr. Philips was inquisitive concerning the visit of a Scotland Yard man to his surgery and would like to know if there was anything he could do.

"Well, not at the moment, thanks, Mr. Philips. It's good of you to ring up, but the little job we had for you will have to be delayed...."

"Little job? What was that, Inspector?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, we wanted you to conduct an autopsy on a dead dog. But the body hasn't been brought in yet, so we'll have to leave it over."

"I see," came back in Mr. Murphy Philips's Irish brogue. "Now, might it have been a dog that died a few weeks ago up at Trentvale Hall? I know you're here working on that case and my mind jumps to that dog."

"Yes. That's the one, Mr. Philips, although I'll have to ask you to keep this information to yourself."

"In that case, I'd have been surprised if the body *had* been brought in, as you say. It was burned at the town destructory some time ago."

"How do you mean, burned, Mr. Philips? My information says buried in the gardens of the Hall."

"Quite true. But it was dug up again and brought to me for examination. I performed a post mortem and found that the poor little devil had been filled with arsenic."

"Who brought him to you? Mrs. Worth?"

"No. I had the body sent to me and also a packet containing a sample of weed killer. I was asked to say if the poison in the dog and the arsenic in the packet tallied. I opened up the body and called in a chemist friend of mine. We found the two samples agreed."

"And for whom did you do this work?"

"Mr. Henry Worth."

CHAPTER XII

VERA WORTH'S ALIBI

“YOU see, Kane, we nearly put our foot in it,” said Littlejohn after the vet. had given the strange news about the dog.

“How?” said Kane, his moustache bristling and his pale eyes protruding.

“My theory depended on Henry’s having insinuated poison into Mrs. Worth’s tea, which was given to the dog instead of being drunk by Vera. If Henry had put in the arsenic, why go to all the trouble of digging up the dog and sending it to the vet. for a post-mortem?”

“Perhaps he couldn’t understand why Vera hadn’t shown signs of poisoning and wanted to make sure what she’d done with the stuff.”

“Yes, but that would have turned the limelight on him properly. The poisoner doesn’t as a rule parade what he’s doing for all to see. No; I’m afraid the theory’s been built on sand and has toppled down as soon as tested. We’ve got to begin again. I still think it’s Vera who put paid to Henry, but I’ve got to find a new explanation to cover the crime. I’ll leave you for a bit and make another call at the Hall. There’s a point or two about the weed killer I don’t quite follow and I want to clear them up. Has Bascombe got back yet?”

The young constable was brought in. He seemed to have thoroughly enjoyed his duty of earlier in the afternoon, for there was a very satisfied smirk on his face which Kane had to remove by sternly frowning upon him.

“Yes, sir. I got some information about Mrs. Worth which might be useful. Fortunately, Bessie—ahem, Miss Ford—overheard the doctor and his wife talking about it. Mrs. Worth asked them over the ’phone after the murder to say she was there all night, because she had met someone secretly at midnight and didn’t want the police to know it if they checked

her alibi. So the Wattersons agreed to keep quiet about her temporary absence."

"Miss Ford overheard that, did she? She's a smart girl, Bascombe," said Littlejohn with a smile.

Bascombe blushed and didn't quite know how to take the remark.

"Anythin' more?" snapped Kane, anxious for his men to put on their best show for their distinguished visitor.

"Yes, sir. The Wattersons owe Mrs. Worth money, I believe, and are willing to do her a favour now and then."

"Indeed! They must owe her a lot to be prepared to commit perjury."

"Yes, sir. One day when Bessie—ahem, Miss Ford ..."

"Oh, for goodness' sake call her Bessie and be done with it!"

"Very good, sir. One day when Bessie was serving tea when Mrs. Worth was there, she saw a cheque for a hundred pounds on the table. It was drawn by Mrs. Worth ... she writes big and Bessie said it nearly leap' up and hit her in the eye as she put down the tray. The Wattersons are extravagant, I know, sir. Owe money up and down, they do."

"Well, you've done quite a good job, you and Bessie between you, Bascombe. Do you happen to know who Mrs. Worth was supposed to be meeting when she left the doctor's at midnight on the night of the crime?"

"Oh yes. I was forgetting. Bessie thinks it was her brother, Mr. Stanley Underhill, sir. The name Stanley was mentioned, but she wasn't as sure of that as of the other things."

"I'm very much obliged to you and Bessie, Bascombe." Littlejohn grinned and nodded dismissal.

The young constable grinned, too. From ear to ear. He saluted awkwardly and looked pleased with himself.

"That'll be all," snapped Kane by way of putting him in his place and the young fellow made a confused exit.

"Kane's jealous of me," he told Bessie that evening in the pictures.

"Now what could she want to be meeting her brother in secret for?" mumbled Littlejohn, stroking his chin. "Looks more fishy than ever. Can she have told her brother that Henry was trying to kill her and the pair of them worked together against him?"

"Search me!" replied Kane and his whiskers hung down in dejection.

The old gardener Matthews was out when the Inspector arrived at the Hall again. He was drinking funeral ale with some cronies at a nearby pub. His daughter, however, asked Littlejohn to come in and sit down, as her father wouldn't be long. They entered the parlour of the lodge, a little-used room, full of oddments and stale air, and the woman bade her visitor be seated.

"I suppose your father tells you most things that happen on the estate, Mrs. Filford," began Littlejohn.

"Oh yes. He be a bit of a chatterbox and can't rest until he've got his bits o' newses off his chest. What have he been sayin' again as he shouldn't?"

"Nothing really. I just wanted to check up on something that happened a short time ago. It concerned the death of Mrs. Worth's pet dog. A pekinese, I believe. Your father buried it."

"That he did, and said it 'ad been poisoned by Mr. Henry. I told him not to be sayin' foolish things as 'ud get us turned from house and home if Mr. Henry got to know—God rest his soul."

"Yes, that's what your father told me...."

"And after him promisin' me to hold his tongue in future. You wait till he gets back ... I'll give 'im a piece of my mind, I will that."

"I understand that the reason for his suspecting Mr. Henry was that your father had seen him taking weed killer from the stock in the tool shed...."

"An' did he tell yew that? Well, I never ...! He b'aint safe to be about, that he b'aint. He got it all wrong and I told him so; 'twas *after* the dog died as Mr. Henry tuck the poison from the shed. I know that, because father told me of the weed killer *after* he'd buried the dog. Several days after.... And him havin' changed the times and made mischief by it. Yew must excuse him, sir. Him bein' a very old man, whose brains be not what they was. You see, he lives most time in the long past, when him and mother was together and he b'aint so sure of happenin's in the present. I do hope he hasn't done no harm anywhere and isn't a-goin' to get himself mixed up with trouble."

The decent woman wrung her hands. She was a chubby, red-faced little body and Littlejohn's news had robbed her of her smile and healthy colour.

"Oh, no, Mrs. Filford. He's done nobody any harm. And his lapse of memory's quite understandable. *You* confirm the course of events, don't you? I mean, that the dog died before Mr. Henry took the weed killer?"

"I do, for sure. On my gospel oath."

“Then that’s all right. Don’t worry.”

The woman heaved a great sigh of relief.

“Can I make you a cup o’ tea, sir?” she said, all smiles and radiant again.

“No, thanks, Mrs. Filford. I must be off now. I’m obliged by your help.”

“Good day, sir, and thank *you*. I don’t know what I’se have to do with dad … I’ll ‘ave to keep ‘im on a chain, I’m thinkin’. Him and his chatter....”

“Deeper and deeper,” said Littlejohn to himself as he made his way back to town. “Could Henry have robbed the poison stock before and been taking another lot when old granddad saw him?”

Watterson was back from the funeral and received Littlejohn in his consulting room. In his mourning attire, he looked like an hotel receptionist, but was hardly as civil as one.

“You again, Inspector!” he said ungraciously. “I can’t spare much time. I’ve been to the funeral and I’m behind with my visits. Please be as brief as you can....”

“I’ve just one or two questions I want clearing up, doctor, and then I’ll leave you undisturbed.”

Watterson assumed a professional hauteur and Littlejohn wouldn’t have been surprised if the doctor had taken out a stethoscope and set about his heart and lungs.

“Why didn’t you tell me, doctor, when I last called that Mrs. Worth wasn’t here *all* the time between nine and one on the night of Mr. Henry Worth’s murder?”

“Wh … what do you mean?”

Dr. Watterson’s professional front caved in sadly. His flabby cheeks turned pale, his eyes shifted here and there, and his snub nose grew greasy with sweat.

“You told me that Mrs. Worth was here all the time. I know that she wasn’t. She was elsewhere between from just before midnight till quarter-past twelve and then returned. Now, doctor, I’ll be glad to hear what you have to say about it.”

Watterson cleared his throat and looked at his poison cabinet bleakly as though wondering whether or not to tear it open and take a quick dose of something to put him out of his misery.

“I may as well explain, Inspector,” he croaked at length. His emotion seemed to affect his voice almost as if he had swallowed a mouthful of gravel. “I’d no intention of obstructing the police. I hadn’t really. I was just trying to help a friend in difficulties....”

“You’ve laid yourself open to very grave penalties, doctor, I must say. The best you can do is to make a clean breast of it all. You’ve caused me a lot of trouble by lying ... yes, I said lying. You can thank your stars it isn’t perjury. I’m very annoyed about it, but I’m content to forget it and make a fresh start if you’ll play fair.”

Dr. Watterson clutched at a straw.

“I’ll tell you all I know, although it’s precious little, Inspector. Mrs. Worth’s a friend of ours. She went out to meet someone just before midnight on the night when Henry died. She got back about half-past. Then, when Henry was killed and the police started investigating, she ’phoned to say that she’d given us as an alibi and said she was here *all* the time. She wanted us to confirm that, saying nothing about her temporary absence. Actually, when she went out, she said she was just going to the stables to see about her horse, but when she asked us to stand by her, she told us where else she’d been....”

“Which was?”

“We promised not to tell, Inspector. It’s damned awkward....”

“I think you’d better tell me everything if you don’t want to have it forced out of you under oath in a witness box, doctor.”

“No ... no. I’ll tell. It doesn’t matter much, I suppose. She wasn’t near the scene of the crime, so how could it affect her? She had to meet her brother, Stanley, just near St. Chad’s at midnight.”

“Why the clandestine arrangement if it was only her brother?”

“I don’t know, Inspector. All I know is, I saw her meet someone in uniform....”

“You watched her, then?”

“Yes, from the front window. She went across to the stables, but left almost at once. I was a bit curious ... ahem.... In fact, I might confess I thought she was meeting ... well....”

“A lover?”

“Put it that way if you like....”

“Who?”

“There were rumours about Henry, you know, but that was all off. I thought they might be meeting again....”

“Sounds like nonsense to me, doctor.”

Peeping Tom! thought Littlejohn.

“That’s all you know, doctor?”

“Yes. On my honour.”

“Very well. And now, have you been treating Mrs. Worth of late?”

Watterson bristled as they got back on professional ground again.

“Come, come, doctor. This concerns the case and if you won’t tell me in private, I’ll have to see that you do so in court.”

“I *have* been treating her, then. Stomach trouble.”

“Gastritis, I gathered.”

“Yes. Nothing gravely wrong....”

“Could you have mistaken poisoning by arsenic for gastritis?”

Watterson looked ready to go through the roof!

“Blast it, Inspector! What is all this nonsense. Certain symptoms are similar, but the idea is ridiculous. *She* certainly had no thought of arsenic.... What are you getting at?”

“I put it this way, sir. Could the apparent gastritis, for which you were treating Mrs. Worth, have been progressive arsenic poisoning?”

“No.”

“I think you’re too categorical in your denial, Dr. Watterson. Neither of you suspected poisoning, so you didn’t look for it. You gave her your usual gastritis bottle and she seemed to improve. In fact, she *did* improve, but not through your medicine. It was because the poisoner had been scared off....”

“My dear Inspector, have you gone mad?”

“Did Mrs. Worth never mention the arsenic, doctor?”

“Never.”

“And you’re her sole medical attendant?”

“Yes. Had she been in trouble that way, I’m sure she would have consulted me....”

“Very good, doctor. Please keep the mention of arsenic a strict secret. I have your word on that point?”

“Most certainly. And the omission in my last statement.... Will that be all right, Inspector? I’ll hear no more about it, I hope.”

“No. It’s forgotten, doctor. But please don’t do it again.”

With that they parted. Littlejohn thanked his stars he never needed to enter *that* surgery as a patient!

CHAPTER XIII

SECRET MEETING

“THE Trentshires were moved last Wednesday from somewhere near Leicester to a few miles outside Burton-on-Trent,” said Kane after a brief telephone conversation with someone or other he knew.

Littlejohn had asked him to find out exactly where Stanley Underhill was stationed. If he had met Vera at the time of Henry’s murder, it was high time a statement was taken from him.

“Thanks. How long will it take me to get to Burton, Kane?”

“Not long. There are fast trains now and then. If you ’phone the camp and ask Major Underhill to get down to Burton and meet you, say at the police station there, you could get it all over to-night.”

“The sooner, the better. Will you find out where the camp is, then, and ask the nearest police station to send a man and make all the arrangements? Perhaps it would be better if we met at some hotel there. An appointment at a police station sounds half way to an arrest.”

“Very good. I’ll see to it.”

Two hours later Littlejohn met Stanley Underhill in the lounge of the “Flying Horse” at Burton. He liked the young fellow at sight and the interview promised well.

“What will you have, Inspector?”

“Beer, please. What else could one drink in Burton?”

“Waiter! Two beers....”

They settled down to business. Underhill was evidently a bit puzzled by the whole affair and didn’t quite know what to make of Littlejohn’s visit. He resembled his sister strongly. Same dark hair, eyes and full, passionate mouth. Same air of intensity and of powers in reserve beneath a veneer of languor and a laziness of speech. But in Stanley’s face there was a trace of

weakness, mostly in the chin; and there was certainly less pride than in his sister's. Probably he had had an easier road to travel in spite of depleted family fortunes and ups and downs. He was as tall as Littlejohn, a good six feet; carried himself well, without an ounce of spare flesh; and had the good colour of a settler in a sunny part of the Empire.

“What’s all this about, Inspector? I must say that I appreciate your makin’ this meetin’ informal and not at a police station.... I half expected somethin’ of the kind although I thought I’d put everything right.”

“Why, sir?”

“Well ... you’re here about the cheque, aren’t you?”

“What cheque?”

“You mean to say ...?”

“I’ve never heard of a cheque.”

“Well, I’ll be damned! More mysterious than ever.”

“No. I’m here to talk about an affair in which your sister is very seriously involved....”

“What ... old Henry Worth’s death, d’you mean? I always said that wedding with old William would lead to no good. Whole family’s a bunch of swine. What she wanted gettin’ mixed up with such cattle for I can’t think.”

“... As far as we have gone in investigating the murder of Henry Worth, suspicion falls on the family as well as anyone else. I’m being quite frank you see....”

“Like the devil, you are, Inspector. I’d have thought that some outsider did for Henry. Some girl he’d seduced, or a workman he’d sacked for no reason whatever, or else some outraged parent who’s child Henry’d refused to make into an honest woman....”

“We’ve explored all such possibilities, but as far as I can see, they can be eliminated. Strange things have been happening at Trentvale Hall, sir, and again and again our attention’s been kept on the family. Our present task is one of elimination ... sooner or later, we’ll have the guilty party. I’m here checking alibis on the night of the crime. I understand that you were with your sister in Trentbridge between midnight and twelve-thirty at the time of the crime....”

“Did she tell you that?”

“No.”

“I thought not. She promised she wouldn’t and I’ve never known Vera go back on her word....”

“Through trying to keep you out of it, Major Underhill, your sister’s involved herself in a pretty plot to deceive and impede the police. She persuaded friends in Trentbridge to say she was at their house at the time when she was with you. We found out that such wasn’t the case. Luckily for your sister and the others concerned, it can’t be classed as perjury, for they merely made simple statements to the police. But they can be charged with obstruction....”

“Oh, damn it all, Inspector. Don’t get ratty about it. It’s somethin’ that can be explained....”

“I wish you’d be quick about it then, sir. This silly business of obscuring the issue has wasted me a couple of days at a time when all our energies are needed in bringing the murderer to book.”

“The meeting had to be kept quiet at the time. I wasn’t supposed to be there at all. But I *had* to see Vera that night and more or less cleared off without permission.”

“Will you begin at the beginning and tell me plainly what the whole thing was about, sir?”

“... A bit awkward. Could you keep the reason for the meetin’ confidential, Inspector. It concerns the cheque I mentioned when first we met.”

“I can’t promise, Major Underhill. This is a murder case. But I’ll do my best. I must, however, have all the details. No more of this obscurity, please.”

“Very good.... Since I came back from Kenya, I’ve been damned hard up. My father hasn’t much cash, and, although I’m fond of Vera, I’ve done so much sneering about the Worth money that I hadn’t the nerve to ask her for a loan. So, I got it elsewhere....”

“Moneylenders?”

“That’s it. I couldn’t repay and the interest kept pilin’ on the debt. In the end an original loan of two hundred pounds had become four hundred pounds.”

“The usual moneylenders’ arithmetic!”

“Absolutely. Meanwhile, I’d joined up and got back my old rank as Captain in the Trentshires. I’m a Major now, as you know.”

“Yes?”

“The moneylender suddenly got active. Unless I paid up the interest, he’d sue me for it. Where was I to lay my hands on two hundred pounds, except from Vera? If the blighter sued me, there’d have been a hell of a row in the Regiment. In fact, I might have been cashiered. I tried to stall the old bloodsucker. Instead, he actually came into Leicester and rang me up at the camp. I met him and he gave me twenty-four hours to pay up. I saw red, got in a hell of a temper, took out my cheque book and gave him a cheque for the whole perishin’ four hundred....”

“You’d money in the bank, then?”

“Twenty-three pounds!”

“I see.”

“It was an impulsive trick and I thought of screwing it out of father.... But my blasted luck intervened. The old chap had a heart attack the day before, and couldn’t be disturbed. I’d got to have the cash at once and there was no time to go dashin’ round the country to pals touchin’ ‘em for it. If the money wasn’t in the bank when my cheque came round it would have gone back ‘R./D.’ I’d have been up for court martial and sacked. I rang up Vera and told her what had happened. She was a sport. She said she’d lend me the lot.”

“That was all right. But why the midnight rendezvous?”

“I said I’d run over for the cheque the following morning and get it from her and pop it in the bank before closing time. As I left the ’phone, I heard the C.O. wanted me. The whole regiment was movin’ quarters, all leave cancelled, and I’d to go down to the War Office right away for instructions. I could have wrecked the whole joint with rage. All fixed up and then that.... So near and yet so far.”

“H’m.”

“I’d to hold myself in readiness to go to London and couldn’t get away until well after nine o’clock. Then, I was supposed to get the train at Leicester. Instead, I borrowed a chap’s car, rang up Vera and hared off to Trentbridge, making a sort of dog-leg on the way to London. I’d have been for it if it had come out that I’d been caperin’ over the countryside instead of attendin’ to duty. I’d papers with me and gallivantin’ about with ‘em would have been a serious offence. I told old Vera and got her to promise to keep the visit under her hat. I calculated I’d be in Trentbridge at about

midnight and asked her to meet me then at St. Chad's church door. It all worked perfectly. I got the cheque, paid it into the bank's London office and got them to 'phone that cover had been received. Old Ikey Mo's cheque would be safely met, although when you beetled along I thought there'd been some hitch. Then, that blasted Henry goes and gets himself killed just at the time I'm meetin' Vera. She did her best to keep me covered and I guess concocted an alibi without me. She's not to blame and I'll take all that's coming, Inspector. It's my ruddy luck, as usual...."

"You needn't fret about it, sir. Now that we've had a proper tale, the affair looks better. But your sister has certainly made things look black for herself by all the intriguing she's carried on to protect you. I'll be as discrete as possible about the affair of the cheque. Meanwhile, I suppose there's no way of counter-checking your statement, sir? This is purely a formal routine confirmation and not an expression of no confidence."

"Well ... you can, of course, ask the bloke I borrowed the car from. Captain Spencer.... He's here in the camp with me. Likely as not, he's at the bar of the 'Stag and Linnet' just down the street at present. Also, I did call round at home to inquire about dad. I didn't see him, but Feathers, the maid, saw me. I went quietly round to the kitchen just to ask about him. I couldn't show up. Feathers promised to tell nobody. I daren't let it get out that I was roamin' around the county when I was supposed to be on an important mission to London. Dad was much better, so I shot off like a hare.... I can't think of any other check I can give you, except the business about the cheque bein' paid in and all that...."

The Major's voice trailed off as though his powers of speech and improvisation were completely exhausted.

"Very good, sir. We'll check with Feathers. I'll have to mention the matter to your sister. You appreciate that, I think."

"Oh, it'll be all right with Vera. Glad you've contacted me. If the poor girl's gettin' into hot water, it's up to me to do what I can, eh?"

He might have been offering to pay her fine in a police court, instead of helping to clear her of suspicion of murder. Littlejohn came to the conclusion that young Underhill hadn't quite grasped the seriousness of Vera's position. Colloquially, the penny hadn't dropped.

"Quite, sir. But the hot water in this case happens to be a suspicion of murder...."

“What!!! Old Vera. Don’t be silly, Inspector. Vera wouldn’t have done in Henry like that. Not that he didn’t deserve it. All the Worths deserve it. Only wish old William had been alive and younger. I’d have had the hide off the old devil for what Vera’s put up with from him and his bloody family. She only married him to spite herself, you know ... broken romance and all that, Inspector. Damn silly nonsense. Wouldn’t have happened if I’d been handy and things had been as they should have been at home. Poor and proud. That’s the Underhills of Glynn. So Vera sold herself to Bill Worth to relieve the mortgage on the old home. Thank God she hadn’t to put up with him for long. But the damn swine left a Will that set ‘em all hatin’ one another like poison. No wonder somebody did in Henry. I bet he’s not the last.”

Young Underhill drank off his third pint to cool his dry throat and, as a thought seemed to strike him, his eyes widened and his mouth sagged open.

“My God! You’d better be quick and catch the one who did for Henry, Inspector. It may be Vera’s turn next. She stands between the family and the fortune, eh? What?”

“She does. We’ll keep an eye on her, sir. The murderer wouldn’t dare try anything else at present, though. Too risky, I’m thinking. At any rate, we’ll watch out.”

“What were we talkin’ about? Oh yes. Old Vera doin’ in Henry. She wouldn’t have killed him that way. Not if I know her, which I do. Can you see her crawlin’ round in the dark tryin’ to attract the victim. Then turnin’ on a gas engine and lettin’ him smother after slammin’ the door? Not likely. Not ruddy likely. She wouldn’t have had the patience to concoct it all. She’s a passionate, impulsive girl, is Vera. Never much of a plotter and planner. Get-it-off-your-chest sort o’ girl. If she’d wanted to kill Henry, she’d have loaded her gun and let him have it....”

Thinking it over later and summing up Vera’s character from what he’d seen of her, Littlejohn was inclined to agree with her brother’s views. All the same, this was an exceptional case and a blood relative was giving his sister a testimonial against suspicion.

The following day, a constable was sent to Underhill Hall to check with Feathers that Stanley had paid the visit mentioned. She swore by all her gods that the statement was true in every particular and that the time was about eleven-thirty. Feathers knew that because it was long past her usual

bedtime, but with the master being ill she'd stayed up a bit helping the nurse. She'd looked at the clock just before Mr. Stanley arrived.

Good, as far as it went. But there was no proof, or confirmation of what Vera and Stanley had done when they met. They might have exchanged the cheque, of course. But they might also have dealt with Henry. If they were as attached as local opinion stated, the brother might have agreed with the sister to clear away once and for all the man who was a menace to her very existence.

The whole affair was very much of a puzzle and Littlejohn was still baffled by it.

All the same, he believed the brother's story and realised that his theories would need reconsidering and revising before he made any definite move in the way of arresting or facing anybody with a charge.

CHAPTER XIV

THE KITCHEN AT TRENTVALE HALL

MISS RICKSON was, at her own wish, quietly cremated on the day following Henry's funeral. Littlejohn, very anxious to interview Clara, the maid at the Hall, again, paid another call to the servants' quarters.

As he crossed the park, the Inspector was relieved to see the butler swimming across the grounds in the direction of the lodge. He had put on a cloth cap to cover his baldness and looked like a character from *Alice in Wonderland*. Later, Littlejohn learned that the man was visiting Matthews, at the request of his mistress. The old gardener had caught a chill at the funeral and was in bed.

Clara looked herself again and greeted Littlejohn in a most friendly manner. She had not been to the funeral and was wearing her afternoon uniform. Her healthy cheeks had regained most of their colour and she seemed to have recovered her good spirits.

"I'm much better, sir, thank you," she answered Littlejohn's formal inquiry about how she found herself after the shocks of recent events.

"I'd like to ask you some more questions ... some we had to leave the other night because you'd had enough for one session then, hadn't you, Clara?"

"Things was a bit upsetting and no mistake, sir. But I don't know what else I can tell you. I seemed to say all there was to say then."

"Let's sit down, shall we, and just quietly go over things?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry. I ought've asked you to sit down."

They settled themselves comfortably in wheelback kitchen chairs. The family seemed to be out again and the great house was still.

"Clara, I want to make one thing quite clear. There's a double murderer still at large and it's up to us to catch him—or her—as soon as possible. The

other night, you seemed averse to answering certain questions because of loyalty to the family....”

“It’s the way I’ve been brought up, sir. Good servants don’t talk about their employers....”

“I understand that. But this is exceptional. It’s in the interests of the family as well as everyone else to have this mystery cleared up. So, Clara, I want clear answers to my questions, if you please.”

“Very well, sir. I’ll do my best.”

“Miss Rickson, then. On the night she died, she was said to have shown considerable agitation after I left her. She went round to the various members of the family asking them questions. Did she see any of them in your presence or when you were about?”

“No, sir. She seems to have been to them one by one, too. I asked Mr. Bancroft, the butler, what it was all about. But he said he was as much in the dark as me....”

“Did Miss Rickson ask you any questions at the time?”

“Yes, sir. She was on about the dog dying again. I told her I didn’t know a thing about it and that I resented people saying that it died from a cup o’ tea that I took to the mistress. Where that tale came from, I don’t know.”

“Don’t worry about it. Nobody’s accusing you, Clara. Did you see Miss Rickson about the house that evening?”

“Yes, sir. I remember thinkin’ it was a bit unusual. She was generally so quiet between her dinner and going to bed. That night, though, she was all over the place. As I said, she was talking to the family. I saw her going to Miss Alice’s room in rather a hurry. I thought the Count had had another of his do’s....”

Here the girl halted suddenly and put her hand on her lips. It was evident that she had touched on some forbidden topic.

“His do’s. What do you mean, Clara?”

“I mean, he might have been drinkin’ again....”

The maid looked uncomfortable and it was evident that she was improvising to cover her indiscretion.

“Now, now, Clara. That won’t do, my girl. You know it wasn’t drinking. He was quite sober when I was here. Besides, why should Miss Rickson need to rush to his rooms when he was drunk? His wife was there. Tell me the truth.”

“You won’t tell if I do, sir. It’s forbidden to mention it here. In fact, sir, I don’t think anybody outside the family knows. He’s an epileptic.... Brought it on with drinkin’, about two years back. Now and then he has attacks. They have to lock him in his room....”

“I see. Has he had any lately?”

“He had one on the night Mr. Henry died, sir. He got out, too, after it was over and Miss Alice was hunting him in the grounds till well past midnight....”

“I understand. And they made you and the rest of the servants swear to say nothing about it?”

“Yes, sir. The Count’s queer for a day or two after one of his attacks. Dazed, like, and very quiet....”

“H’m. Has he ever been violent on such occasions, Clara?”

“Not that I’d know of, sir. But him and Miss Alice generally keep to their rooms then. She looks well after him. Not often he gives her the slip.”

“Does the doctor call when he’s taken ill?”

“Yes, sir. The Count doesn’t like Dr. Watterson. He has Dr. Firebrace from Trentbridge. The doctor was here when the Count got outdoors. They thought he was in bed....”

“Very well, Clara. Now back to Miss Rickson. Did you see her anywhere else on the night she died?”

“She was in the gun room doin’ something for a bit. I thought she was after Miss Alice. She and the Count had been there....”

“What was she doing? Does she often go there?”

“No, sir. There’s nothin’ in there to interest her. Besides, it’s a cold, uncomfortable room and all them animals’ ‘eads gives you the creeps....”

Littlejohn quite agreed.

“As regards Mr. Henry and Mr. Gerald. I hear they didn’t hit it off very well at times. Did they do much quarrelling and arguing about the house ...?”

Clara began to wring her hands. It was against all her training to talk with outsiders about the family.

“They did have rows now and then, but what family doesn’t?”

“What about, Clara?”

The girl pushed back her fair hair, which in her flurry, seemed in some way to grow more and more disordered of its own accord. She was a pretty

girl and her confusion made her prettier than ever.

“Oh, sometimes they’d quarrel about the works. Mr. Henry was more ... well ... cleverer than Mr. Gerald and he’d get a bit sarcastic with him now and then. Then Mr. Gerald’s temper would rise and he’d go for Mr. Henry and you’d hear them at it hammer and tongs....”

“When was the last of these quarrels, Clara?”

“Last Monday, I think it was. I heard them at it in Mr. Henry’s study....”

“Did you overhear any of it?”

Clara began to pluck the lace on her apron and hesitated. “Remember what I told you, Clara. I *must* know.”

“I don’t quite remember exactly, but it sounded something about being short of money.”

“Who was short of money?”

“Mr. Gerald, I think. Mr. Henry was shouting at him. Something about ‘You might be hard up, but there’s no excuse for’... and then he swore ‘orribly, ‘... there’s no excuse for *that*.’ What *that* was, I don’t know. But Mr. Gerald back-answered him as loud, and swearing too. ‘You lyin’ little swine,’ says Mr. Gerald. ‘You sneakin’ little rat. As if I’d stoop to it....’ They both raised their voices when they were angry and I couldn’t help hearin’ just that as I passed.”

“Nothing more?”

“No, sir.”

“Did Henry come and question you about the tea and the dog dying after it happened?”

“No, sir. Mr. Gerald did, though. He asked me if anyone had stopped me and interfered with me on the way with the tray to Mrs. Worth. I said no. And I told him what I told you. I just put it down for a minute while I got the biscuits.”

“Oh. That all?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Everybody out this afternoon, Clara?”

“Yes, sir. Mr. Bancroft’s just gone to the lodge with a bottle of port for Matthews, who’s got a chill. The rest are out.... Miss Alice went to the funeral.... Mrs. Worth’s rode over to see her father, who’s not so well. The Count’s in town somewhere and Mr. Gerald’s at the works....”

The girl rose and smoothed down her dress as though anticipating the return of Bancroft.

“One more question, Clara. Miss Rickson had glucose in her sugar basin, hadn’t she?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did all the family know it was glucose?”

“I couldn’t say, sir. The little joke was about Ricky’s hoard of *sugar*, sir. But then, you’d perhaps call it sugar in a joke....”

“Where did the glucose come from?”

“Pickthorne’s, the chemists, down in town, sir. It’s very scarce these days and we had to get it there, because doctor gave Miss Rickson a sort of priority note to get it on account of her health.”

“Who went for it?”

“Oh, anybody who happened to be in that direction.”

“Including members of the family?”

“Yes, sir. I’ve known Miss Alice call for it ... or even the Count. He didn’t mind doing errands.... He’s nothin’ else to do.”

“Did Mr. Henry ... or Mr. Gerald, or Mrs. Worth ever get it?”

“I couldn’t say that, sir. Though I’ve no doubt they would do if Miss Rickson wanted it badly. We was all fond of Miss Rickson, sir.”

“Thank you again, Clara. You’ve been very useful and I will try to be discrete about the information you’ve given me. I’ll see you don’t suffer by disclosing family secrets, anyway. Good day, Clara.”

“Good day, sir. It’s been a pleasure.”

Avoiding Bancroft, who was pursuing a ponderous course homewards, Littlejohn took the shortest way back to Trentbridge and made for the High Street, where Pickthorne’s was one of the largest and most prosperous-looking shops. Entering, he asked for a word in private with the manager. An eager young assistant led the Inspector into a small waiting room, which seemed to combine the functions of an optical department and a sanctuary for the fitting of trusses and elastic stockings. Prominently displayed on a table were two bell pushes labelled respectively, “Male Assistant”, “Female Assistant”. Littlejohn didn’t like the place. It had a furtive atmosphere about it, as though dope were peddled there, too. He lit his pipe and disinfected it thoroughly whilst he waited.

Mr. Lancelot Pickthorne himself bounced in before long, rubbing his soft fat hands and beaming from ear to ear. He was small and flabby with a pale, sagging face, and looked as though, beneath his skin deep grin, he was suffering from some inner complaint which all the nostrums in his shop were powerless to heal.

“Now, sir. And what can we do for you?”

Mr. Pickthorne’s little piggy eyes took in Littlejohn from head to foot, as though trying to single out his weakness and attack it before he had spoken.

When Littlejohn produced his card, Mr. Pickthorne’s smile vanished, as though somebody had cleaned it from his face with a duster. He had been making a pretty penny out of some illicit cosmetics and wondered if his sins had found him out. Or, again, had some of the assistants been blundering with a prescription?

“How do you do? And to what do we owe the pleasure of this visit, Inspector?”

The chemist was trying to smile again, but it looked more like an attack of nausea.

“Just a little matter about glucose, which you supplied to the late Miss Rickson, of Trentvale Hall, sir.”

“Glucose.... But, I do assure you, Inspector, that the tins are sealed when they arrive here and we never open them. If there’s been any accident with one, we are quite innocent. It’ll be the maker’s fault, not ours.”

“Oh, nothing of that sort, sir....”

Mr. Pickthorne breathed a deep sigh of relief and clutched the table for support.

“It’s just a question of who called for it from time to time. A routine check, if you understand, sir. Can you tell me if all the Worth family and servants have been here for it during the time Miss Rickson has had it?”

“Just a minute, Inspector. I’ll inquire. Take a seat, please.”

The chemist scuttled out and the door swung to behind him. He was back in next to no time.

“I’ve interrogated all the assistants, Inspector. One and another tells me that all the family, except Mr. Gerald and Mr. Henry, have picked up the tins from time to time. There’s always one or another of the Worths in here for something and it’s understood that when glucose stocks arrive, we send one to Miss Rickson ... or rather, *did* send one, I should say. She was a bit

feeble and couldn't come herself, so whoever of the family was in about the time, we'd ask them kindly to take the parcel. Except, of course, Mr. Henry or Mr. Gerald. We couldn't trouble them. *Or* Bancroft, when he was in. He didn't like being troubled, either. *He* wouldn't."

From which Littlejohn gathered that the two fat men were not on the best of terms. He would have liked to see them antagonistically swimming round each other like angry goldfish in an aquarium.

"And lastly, Mr. Pickthorne, just another query. You'll have seen that Miss Rickson's inquest was adjourned, but that the cause of her death was found to be veronal ... an overdose. Have you at any time supplied veronal to the Hall?"

"Oh, yes. I can't say when without looking it up, but Mr. Henry himself recently had a supply on Dr. Watterson's orders. He couldn't sleep, I believe. These are worrying times for business-men, aren't they? And then there's the Count, too. Dr. Firebrace has prescribed veronal for him...."

"In fair quantities, sir?"

"As a rule, they get a dozen tablets, but in Mr. Henry's case, there were two dozen...."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Pickthorne. Sorry to take up your time."

"Don't mention it, Inspector. It's a pleasure, I'm sure.... Gooooood afternoon."

He was back in the shop, hard at it, before the main door closed on Littlejohn. Kowtowing furiously to a lady customer with a loud voice and off-hand manner, he produced from beneath the counter a large package and with grave gestures indicated that the transaction was secret and a special favour.

"Ah, they have arrived ... I'll take another three," boomed the noisy woman, and although the closing door cut off Littlejohn from all that followed, his last view of the shop was of all the women there assembled gathering round Mr. Pickthorne and customer with angry looks and pugnacious gestures.

CHAPTER XV

THE GIRL WITH RED HAIR

DR. FIREBRACE, Count Châteaulœuf's medical man, was a tumbledown specimen but extremely competent. The curly grey hair which receded from a fine forehead bestrewed the collar of his jacket liberally with dandruff and the doctor was too occupied with his own devices to bother to brush it off. His dark, heavy lidded eyes gazed drearily through thick, dusty spectacles over the top of which he regarded anything which interested him. His tall flabby figure rippled in his shabby suit as he walked, and from his thick lips there dangled eternally a cigarette which added its share to the untidy stains on his coat and trousers. He was the cleverest man in Trentbridge by a long chalk. Other doctors consulted him whenever they were fast in a case and his own patients received first class treatment and bills only when Mrs. Firebrace was short of money. She was as bad as her husband. A perfect old ragbag interested in a drove of dogs and cats and, some said, in the bottle.

The doctor himself did not drink. His dozy, lackadaisical manner was due to lack of sleep. He was an eminent astronomer and spent most nights sitting on his roof watching the stars through an out-of-date telescope to which he had added his own improvements.

“Yes, Châteaulœuf's an epileptic, but who's told you? I thought he kept it dark,” said Firebrace after Littlejohn had introduced himself and stated his business. The Inspector had found the doctor in his shirt sleeves washing up dishes in the kitchen. They could never keep a maid for long and were suffering at the moment from lack of one. Mrs. Firebrace was in London at a dog show; the doctor had used up all the clean dishes and was hungry.

“I was told at the Hall yesterday, doctor,” said Littlejohn, side-stepping the inquiry.

“What good is it going to do you to know it?” went on Firebrace. “He’s not a homicidal maniac, you know. Quite sane. An object of pity, really. A fool to himself....”

The front door bell rang.

“Excuse me,” said the harassed man, slipped on his jacket and went to answer it himself. He could be heard in confabulation with somebody who wanted him to call somewhere on his next round of visits.

They resumed their talk when the matter had been settled.

“You were called in to the Count on the night of Mr. Henry’s death, I understand, sir?”

“Let me see ... Henry ... Henry.... Oh, the one who was gassed ...! Yes, yes ... yes, I was called in to the Count. He’d had another fit. Yes.”

The doctor looked over his glasses and beamed at his visitor as though highly gratified at his feat of memory.

“Do you remember the time, sir?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. I’d finished the surgery and was on the roof with my telescope.... I’m working on a law concerning the movements of the satellites of Saturn, Inspector. Now ... if to five times the movement of the first satellite you add that of the third, and four times that of the fourth, the whole will equal ten times the movement of the second....”

“Any bread to-day?”

A Mongolian-looking youth thrust a cheeky head round the kitchen door and the doctor had to do a deal with him before returning to his visitor.

“Where were we?”

“The time you were called in to attend to the Count, sir?”

“Oh yes. I don’t take much heed of time ... except solar and stellar.... But that night at ten thirty-seven, four minutes before I had a most important measurement to make, there was an urgent call from the Hall. Yes, an urgent call.... The Count had had an attack. I hurried off....”

“You’d be there about a quarter to eleven, then, doctor?”

“Thereabouts. It took about an hour to get him settled. Then, we got him to bed and I was mixing him some medicine in the bathroom and his wife had gone for a glass ... and if the fellow didn’t get up and wander off somewhere....”

“At nearly midnight?”

“Oh, about eleven forty-five.... I remember we found one of the french windows open and went out in the grounds after him.... I looked regretfully at my setting planets as I went out and judged it nearly midnight. Yes ... took us half an hour to find him. He was sitting quietly in the summer house. Said a passion for fresh air came over him. Actually, he’d been drinking and had sneaked off with a bottle of whisky....”

“So, he was out of everybody’s sight for about half an hour, during which time Mr. Henry was being killed at the works?”

“Yes, Inspector. What of it?”

The old doctor blinked absently and lit a cigarette from the stump of an old one, which he threw through the open window into the street.

“Doesn’t it strike you, sir ...?”

Dr. Firebrace suddenly reared his head.

“Oh dear me, Inspector. Never in this world. You mean the Count went all the way to Worth’s Foundry and killed Henry.... No. Not on your life. In the first place, he was so exhausted after his attack, that it puzzled me how he mustered energy to dodge us and get outside. His lust for alcohol gave him strength, I suppose. You can take it from me, he’d never have reached the foundry, although it’s not very far from the Hall. Take that as *expert* opinion, Inspector, and put it right out of your head.”

The pronouncement was made with such conviction that Littlejohn accepted it.

Meanwhile, the doctor had produced a piece of cold pork pie, bread, butter, pickles and a bottle of beer and was clearing a corner of the dining table of its load of books and papers. The front door bell rang again.

This time it was a pupil of the council school round the corner. Somebody had fallen in the school yard and it looked as if he had broken something. Could the doctor ...?

“Did you ever prescribe veronal for the Count, sir?” Littlejohn managed to ask in the ensuing confusion.

“Frequently, Inspector. His wife had a supply for use during the nervously agitated times which preceded and followed attacks.”

“Come again, Inspector, if you want to know anything else. I’ll be in after surgery to-night. We can resume our talk about Saturn then, too. Most interesting. All right, boy, I’m coming.... Let yourself out, Inspector. The

lock's a spring one. Dear me, where's my key? Ah, here we are.... Now, boy...."

Littlejohn was left in charge of the untidy house. In the hall hung diplomas testifying to the highest possible medical qualifications. The whole place stank of disinfectants, dogs and cats. The Inspector slammed the door on the lot.

There was one more port of call for Littlejohn that morning. On a housing estate on the fringe of the town lived the girl with red hair, Veronica Bartlett, who had wept so copiously at Mr. Henry's funeral service.

"Itldoo", Peabody Way, North Trentbridge.

Littlejohn winced at the name of the house someone had given him. It ought to be said in justification of Mr. Cuthbert Bartlett, the girl's father, that the house was already named when he became a tenant. The man who tacked its silly title to the gate in letters which cost sixpence apiece at the ironmonger's, did a moonlight flit after three months' tenancy, owing thirteen weeks' rent.

Cuthbert answered the door. He was a physical culture maniac in his spare time, which accounted for the state of the garden, a rubbish tip on which every variety of weed flourished. When the neighbours complained, Cuthbert challenged them to physical combat.

Shoulders thrown back, chin pressed down as though he were trying to force his head from his body, legs bowed athletically and calves almost muscle-bound from overdevelopment, Mr. Bartlett faced Littlejohn and gazed aggressively and questioningly at him. He was an insurance agent and was in for lunch after a session of premium collecting. His daughter, too, was at home, as Littlejohn had learned at the works, for her father disapproved of the food supplied in the canteen, contending that his own system of diet was streets ahead of it and cheaper, too. He and his daughter had just finished a meal of carrots, spinach and vegetable sausages and Bartlett was therefore ready for anything. There he stood at the door of his castle, his shock of red hair leaping like flames from his scalp and his hairy nostrils dilated like those of a war horse. The Inspector decided that his face would have qualified him for the Gestapo.

"Yes?" said red head. He thought Littlejohn was a Tory politician canvassing in connection with the forthcoming by-election and was ready to

set about him, for he was a Communist himself.

The Inspector outlined the purpose of his visit. He asked if Miss Bartlett was available.

Cuthbert took up a protective attitude, for he was her sole surviving parent. It was said that he had cycled his wife to death by overdoing tandem riding at week ends.

“What do you want with her? I warn you, I won’t have any brow beating. If her boss *was* murdered, she had nothing to do with it....”

At this point Veronica herself appeared. She was a very lovely girl, which was a tribute to her father’s system of gymnastics and diet. Flaming red hair, clear, flawless complexion, dark blue eyes and high cheek bones, setting off a perfect figure and long shapely limbs. She seemed to have modelled herself on some film star or other, the name of whom evaded Littlejohn, although he was familiar with her style, which cropped up in everything Veronica did.

Languidly the girl thrust her father aside. She was the poor man’s Waterloo and he took a back seat at once.

“Were you wanting to see me, Inspector?” said the red headed girl, in the language of a dramatic school. She attended lessons in elocution regularly.

“Yes, if you can spare a few minutes before you go back to the office, Miss Bartlett?”

“Come in, then....”

With her father forming a rigid, muscle-bound bodyguard in the rear, the procession moved into a small parlour decked out in modern limed oak furniture, modern brass, and modern problem pictures. One of the latter depicted a man in chains weeping and puzzled Littlejohn no end. On either side of it were framed portraits of Mr. Bartlett, one almost naked, bulging proudly beside a table full of trophies for either croquet or tossing the hammer, the Inspector could not quite make out which from the object held by the athlete; the other as centrepiece of a gathering of extremely aggressive-looking men and women, who might have been revolutionaries or food reformers, or both.

“You needn’t stay, dad. I’ll manage,” said the girl, evidently intent on conducting the interview without parental restriction. The man with red hair did as he was bidden and retired to the scullery to make noises of washing up or juggling with crockery.

It seemed evident why the philandering Henry had chosen Miss Bartlett as his secretary and had her trained at his own expense for the job. Up to the time of his death, however, Worth had remained content with using her as a pleasant ornament for his office and car. Her father had made it plain in a confidential interview about his daughter's future, that he would expertly break every bone in Henry's body if he tried to take any liberties....

"Do take a seat, Inspector," said the girl, gracefully lowering herself on to a large couch.

Littlejohn was not much of a mimic, but he and his wife derived a lot of fun from his description of that interview when he got home to Hampstead at length.

Miss Bartlett was not playing the part of a vamp that day. She was the well bred girl helping the law to avenge her chief.

"Actually, I don't think I can help much, Inspector. I was in bed and fast asleep when it all happened," she said. "But ..."

"You are, I believe ... or rather were, Mr. Henry's secretary, Miss Bartlett?"

"Yes. Although actually, I'm only on probation. I've only just trained for it. Before that, I was in the general office...."

"I want you to tell me if you can, what appeared to be Mr. Henry's state of mind just before his death. Say, a day or two before...."

Littlejohn rattled on. He had no time to become involved in a long winded and dramatic scene.

"You mean, was he worried or gay?"

"That's it."

"Actually, he was troubled and, shall we say, preoccupied-looking. I noticed that. Sometimes he didn't seem to hear what was said to him."

"Any idea what caused it?"

"Actually, I think a number of things...."

Veronica Bartlett articulated precisely, carefully enunciating each syllable, emitting words from lips and tongue, as instructed by her professor of elocution. The refinement somehow reminded Littlejohn of a hot house.

"... For some reason he was worried about the death of Mrs. Worth's dog...."

"He mentioned that to you?"

“Not exactly. The vet. ’phoned him about it and the message made him very agitated. I could never understand the reason. Until the dog died, he never mentioned it. I had no idea he was so fond of it.”

“Anything else, Miss Bartlett?”

The girl made gestures of stimulating recollection and finally opened her fine eyes wide as though remembering something terrible.

“He got *frightfully* fussed about something in the way of moulding sand. Why, I don’t know. I thought he was going mad ... crazy....”

“I see. He brought a sample into the office?”

“Yes. And compared it with a specimen he had in an envelope.”

“Ah! He did that?”

“Finally, he and Mr. Gerald had the biggest row I’ve ever heard. Actually, I wasn’t in the room. I have a little office of my own, you know. But it was going on next door and I couldn’t help overhearing until they realised I was there. Then they went and finished it off in Mr. Gerald’s room, which had a connecting door with Mr. Henry’s. I didn’t hear any more then.”

“You heard some of it, Miss Bartlett?”

“Actually, I did.... I don’t know whether I ought to tell it. ... I think it concerned the works and as I’m only guessing what it’s about, I ... I ... well ...”

“I’m not asking you for a commentary on the conversation, Miss Bartlett. I want to know as near as possible the actual words. You’ll have no responsibility in the matter and it will be a great help if you can recall them to mind.”

Veronica clasped her hands and gazed into space. It was like the beginning of a film in which the heroine tells the story of her life and wherein the scene slowly becomes a throw-back of the years of long ago.

“The beginning was in low voices. Gradually, as their tempers rose, they began to shout. They exchanged one or two sentences each before they remembered where they were ...”

“Veronica! Time you were getting back to the office. You’ll be late,” came from the kitchen where, having finished his washing up, the gymnast sounded to be busying himself with mop and pail.

The girl with red hair was so immersed in her tale that she ignored the heckling.

“... remembered where they were and closed the doors and went to the inner room.”

“What did you hear?”

“Actually, I can’t be sure if it’s word for word, but as far as I remember, Henry said, ‘Now, once and for all, there’s to be no more of it, understand? It’s got to stop here and now. I’ve had expert examination and I know everything you’ve been at.’ I think Mr. Gerald said something like, ‘You go to hell! It’s your own imagination. You know I wouldn’t stoop to money getting in that way.’”

“Yes ...?”

“Mr. Henry went on in a louder voice, ‘Don’t lie to me. I have the report here.... And another thing, I know of your jiggery-pokery with moulding sand.’ Mr. Gerald was furious. ‘You’re mad,’ he shouted. ‘Just plumb crazy ...’ and then they slammed the doors and I didn’t hear anything else.”

“And what do you think the quarrel was about, Miss Bartlett?”

“I’m sure Mr. Henry had discovered Mr. Gerald cooking the books and using the firm’s cash. What else could it have been? Mr. Henry must have had an expert accountant on the books, or something. That’s my opinion. And the moulding sand. I suppose that referred to some sort of cheating with the company’s stock.... Actually ...”

“Veronica! Do you hear?”

“What is it, daddy?”

“Time you were back at the office.”

“Oh, that doesn’t matter. Now Mr. Henry’s not there, it’s happy-go-lucky.”

“Mr. Gerald doesn’t like the works, Miss Bartlett?” interjected Littlejohn.

“No, Inspector. He tried a time or two to break away and live an independent existence. Actually, he’s tried all sorts of things to make enough money. Speculating on the Stock Exchange and such. But he hasn’t managed it. He can’t do without the money he gets from the firm and he’d lose that if he cut adrift....”

“How do you know this?”

“Oh, Mr. Waghorn, the secretary of the firm, told me once in a burst of confidence after Mr. Henry and Mr. Gerald had been having a row about Mr. Gerald’s drawings.”

“I see....”

Veronica had taken out her lipstick and flapjack and was hastily redecorating her pretty face. Languidly she rose, the job apparently completed to her satisfaction.

“Really, I must be off now, Inspector. Please excuse me.”

“I must be getting along, too. Thanks for your help, Miss Bartlett. You’ve been most useful.”

She flashed a sparkling glance at Littlejohn which tantalised him in that he couldn’t for the life of him recollect the name of the film star prototype of the young red head.

The three of them emerged from the cottage in single file. Mr. Bartlett wheeling a cycle, his trousers fastened with clips round his bulging calves, his fiery hair leaping from his bare head, shoulders back, chin in.... The girl waved a farewell with her finger tips to the two men and ran to join a youth waiting for her in a sports car ornamented with trophies and with most of its entrails exhibited on the outside of the bonnet. Littlejohn lit his pipe and stood with Bartlett until the noisy vehicle had departed amid clouds of fumes and with violent explosions.

Bartlett sniffed the air like a gun dog and then snorted.

“Take my advice, Inspector,” he said dogmatically. “Stop smoking. Bad for you. Gives you duodenal ulcers.”

He looked boldly up and down the figure of a passing flapper and, as though enlivened by the sight of it, swung nimbly into the saddle of his bicycle, nodded a farewell, and pedalled away after his premiums with the utmost vigour.

He was a small, agitated object in the distance before Littlejohn recovered from this sudden attack and made off, grinning to himself, for the police station again.

CHAPTER XVI

HIGH FINANCE

MR. SIMON WAGHORN, secretary of Worth's Engineering Co. (Trentbridge) Limited, to give it its proper name, was one of the faithful retainers of the family. He had entered the firm as office boy and been a loyal and patient servant for forty-five years. At the age of fifteen he had begun, as junior clerk, to answer the boss's bell at the double; at sixty, now secretary of the works, he still ran when one of the family rang the buzzer which, with sublime impertinence, they still did when they wanted him.

If, however, Waghorn lost none of his subservience to his principals, he was stiff and strict with his underlings. He always tried to behave towards them as he imagined the Worths would do. Littlejohn found him a bit difficult until he had talked him round.

From the point of view of years, Waghorn looked his age. Perhaps a year or two more; you might have taken him for nearly seventy when he'd slept badly or when one of the directors was annoyed with him. His face was heavily lined; deep furrows across the forehead and from the ends of his long upper lip to the roots of his nose. He suffered from chronic dyspepsia and in spite of his doctor's reassurances, thought it was something far worse. From the medical dictionary which he was always reading, he had diagnosed carcinoma, was worrying himself to death about it, and taking doses of white powder every hour or two. Tall, emaciated, with his heavy, colourless face cleanshaven, he would have looked the part of a butler better than his own.

Mr. Waghorn had never got out of the habit, acquired when he joined the firm, of changing into an office jacket. He faced Littlejohn in trousers and vest of navy blue serge and coat of grey cheviot, with frayed cuffs and pins sticking out of the lapels.

He was secretary in name alone and because it was beneath the dignity of one of the family to sign as such. One of the Worths had always handled the confidential work. Waghorn was the clerical beast of burden.

“Come in.”

The secretary’s voice was plaintive. He hadn’t got over the death of Mr. Henry, who had always treated him decently and called him by his Christian name. That, added to the mental tortures imposed by his medical dictionary ...

Waghorn was sitting at a desk, stirring bismuth powder into a glass of water. He gulped it down and when it reached his stomach, was able to get his breath again and speak.

“Sit down, Inspector, will you?”

Next door somebody was furiously typing. The secretary’s room was constructed with walls of three-ply and every sound from outside penetrated. The desk was shabby and littered with papers. Waghorn did not seem particularly busy in spite of the confusion of files, letter baskets and correspondence. He just seemed to be waiting for something ... the sound of the family buzzer, calling him into The Presence, like a hard pressed geni of the lamp. Care sat heavily on his shoulders....

“You’re the detective who’s come from London to help them catch Mr. Henry’s murderer, are you?”

“Yes, sir. I’m here to enlist your help on one or two rather delicate matters.”

The secretary took a liking to the big, comfortable man on the other side of the desk. He had called him “sir”. Few people did that. One or two polite ones called him Mr. Waghorn. The old workmen knew him as Simon; others as Waggy. For the most part, it was nothing at all....

“What can I do, Inspector? You mustn’t ask me to divulge anything confidential in the firm. I couldn’t do that.... It’s terrible to think of Mr. Henry being murdered. An awful shock.”

He rubbed his hand back and forth across his waistcoat, massaging the stomach beneath.

“Mr. Henry led rather a wild life, personally, I understand.”

Waghorn held out the palms of his hands at Littlejohn, as though fending off the plague. He was a childless widower, himself. Incapable of any indiscretion, a deacon of his chapel, yet with a mind vivid in imagining

carnal sin. A Saturnalia of Mr. Henry's misdeeds passed before his inner eye.

"They said he did. I didn't pry into the private lives of my employers...."

"I'm sorry to have to embarrass you a bit, but I'm anxious to get some background. You see, it will be clearer to discover what actually happened if we can get a picture ... a sort of general atmosphere surrounding the family."

"I understand."

It was obvious he didn't.

"Did Mr. Henry and Mr. Gerald agree with each other?"

Waghorn's guard was up at once.

"Yes."

"I'm glad to hear that from you, sir. Everybody else has told me they were in the habit of quarrelling frequently. Your testimony at the adjourned inquest, under oath, of course, will be most useful."

Littlejohn looked him steadily in the eyes until it quite broke down the secretary's resistance and put him out of countenance. He rose from his chair and took a couple of tired paces up and down his office.

"What do you want to know about it, Inspector?" he said at last, having apparently made up his mind.

"I'll come right to the point, Mr. Waghorn. What have they been quarrelling about of late?"

"I don't know. Has it any bearing on the murder?"

"Most likely. Sure you have no ideas?"

"They must have had a bad quarrel last week. They weren't speaking to each other for two days before Mr. Henry died. I think it was something on the usual theme. Mr. Gerald wanted to get out of the works and live his own life. He's never liked working here. But beggars can't be choosers...."

"So bad, eh?"

"Look how his father left him. Nothing, but what he earned at the works and his shareholding and director's fees."

"And what do you think they were quarrelling about on that score?"

"Gerald was desperate to get away. As I said, he never took to the job, but his father and Mr. Henry kept him at it. As you know, works like these have done well in the war. The value of our shares—they're all held by the family—have gone up considerably. Mr. Gerald calculated that his holding

would realise enough to give him a steady income. All he wanted was to sell them. Mr. Henry wouldn't buy. Mrs. William Worth said she'd enough in the works without wanting any more. And Miss Alice hasn't the money. Gerald wanted to dispose of them outside, then. But Henry wouldn't agree to it and it needed his consent, because without it, we couldn't register the transfer in our books.... They quarrelled for days about it. But a day or two before Henry died, they seemed red-hot at it and got to not speaking to each other....”

“You never heard them actually quarrelling? I mean, to know what they were saying, sir?”

“No, Inspector. This office is too far away from their suite. I can't help there.”

“Mr. Gerald was hard up?”

“His income depended on his staying here. He had extravagant habits, too. Spent a lot. Used to anticipate his fees whenever he could, and overdraw at the bank on the strength of them. You see, I'm telling you what I know, Inspector. You'll respect my confidence, won't you?”

“Certainly, Mr. Waghorn. What exactly does Mr. Gerald do in the administration of this place?”

“Deals with staff. Interviews travellers and representatives from the Ministry....”

“Nothing on the practical side? In the foundry or among the accountancy?”

“No. He never did that. Mr. Henry controlled those, although what's going to happen now, I don't know. Several combines have wanted to take over the works. I guess they'll sell out to them now. And Mr. Gerald will be free at last....”

“He didn't deal with the books, the bank, and the like?”

“No, Inspector. He saw the figures, progress reports, balance sheet and profit statements, but had no access to the routine. There again, he was only interested in getting his share and his salary.”

“So the quarrelling between the brothers couldn't have been because Mr. Gerald had, in any way, been taking the firm's cash ... falsifying the books....”

Mr. Waghorn looked pityingly at his visitor.

“It might seem easy, Inspector, in fiction, but falsifying books isn’t as simple as all that. It needs somebody who not only knows the principles of accounting, but is also smart enough to pull the wool over the eyes of others who know as much as he does. Mr. Gerald doesn’t even know the elements of book keeping, to say nothing about cooking the books. You can take it from me, there’s been nothing of that sort going on. If there had, I’d have been the first to know.”

Littlejohn picked up his hat.

“Well, I’m much obliged for your help, Mr. Waghorn. The opinion and point of view of a man on the spot ... on the inside ... is always helpful.”

“Don’t mention it, Inspector. Glad to be of help.”

He rose from his desk and wearily showed Littlejohn to the door. Then he returned and sat down, wondering if he had said too much. In his mild enthusiasm he had perhaps talked too fast....

Poor Waghorn never saw the murderer of his boss brought to justice, for that very night his pain grew worse and he went to see Firebrace, instead of the usual Watterson. His own diagnosis was right. It *was* carcinoma....

“I want a bit of information on Gerald Worth’s finances,” said Littlejohn when he got back to the “Rod and Line”, “but I’m hanged if I can think how to get it....”

Cairns closed one eye and rubbed his chin.

“If I was you, sir, I’d try Cruickshank. He’s the ex-manager of the local branch of the Home Counties Bank, where the Worths do business. He’s the one I told you about.... Didn’t see eye to eye with his head office, so threw up his job and started as a commission agent. He’ll be in for his usual whisky or two very shortly. If you catch him and stand him one, he’ll talk your head off.”

It was not long before Cruickshank arrived.

A tall, heavily built man of about fifty. He wore a natty tweed suit, blue shirt and collar, and his club colours flew like a banner from his neck. A good looking chap, with heavy lidded hazel eyes, curly grey hair and florid cheeks. He posed as a man of the world—a small town smart-Alec. It was a wonder he had stayed in the bank long enough to become a manager, for he was obviously of a type whose ideas and mode of life ran far ahead of his income.

“Afternoon, Cairns. The usual, please.”

“Very good, Mr. Cruickshank.... Can I get you anything, Inspector?”

Very cunning of Cairns. Littlejohn had been sitting by the fire in the small room labelled “Snug”, when the newcomer put in an appearance. Cruickshank eyed him with eager curiosity.

“You the Scotland Yard man on the Worth case, sir?” he said playing with his flashy moustache.

“Yes, sir.”

“My name’s Cruickshank. Everybody knows me here. Not often we get Scotland Yard swooping down on us.... But then, the local police hardly know how to cope with murder, eh?”

Normally, Littlejohn would have avoided the fellow. He was obviously a gasbag, ready to open up on anyone willing to listen.

Drinks arrived. Cruickshank paid for them both. Littlejohn stood the next round. By that time, the ex-banker was well under weigh.

“Worths are damn’ funny family. Useter manage the bank here before I started up on my own. Now, you’d have thought men would have opened up to their bank manager, wouldn’t you? Not Messrs. Henry and Gerald. Close as oysters. Not that I didn’t sum ’em up pretty thoroughly from readin’ between the lines in their accounts. Have another drink?”

Littlejohn declined. He hadn’t got half way through his second. He didn’t propose to try to keep up with the obvious soak who, with his back to the fire and his legs apart like an inverted V, was now holding the floor. There was no one else present for which the Inspector was thankful.

“Wealthy people I should think, Mr. Cruickshank.”

“There’s money in the family, right enough. But William Worth, the old devil, tied it up. Left it in trust for a wife younger than the family who were to inherit when she died.... I suppose you’ve heard all that. Talk of the town. Henry was quite well off, you know. Smart chap, Henry. Engineer and inventor. Sold quite a lot of patents and gadgets. Did well out of ’em. Gerald, however, hardly has a bean. Dependent on his earnings at the works....”

“Extravagant?”

“You’re telling me. Trouble with Gerald ... brought up all wrong. If the old man wanted him at the works, ought never to have sent him to Oxford. Gave him ideas that were all wrong. Made him loathe industry ... dark

satanic mills and all that. Always champing at the bit wantin' to get away and play at being the arty man of leisure."

"I see. Spends a lot of money trying to forget the time he thinks he's wasting at the mills."

"You've hit the nail on the head. Now ... I could tell you things. No breach of confidence against former employers. But do you know ..."

Cruickshank downed his third double whisky and approached Littlejohn with a confidential air, exaggerated almost into a caricature by his half drunken owliness. He breathed alcohol over the Inspector and took him by the lapel of his coat.

"... Now believe me or not.... He's got a nice little flat in a mews off Eaton Square in London. *And* a nice little girl with it. Goes off there for week ends and entertains his arty friends. That's what he'd like to be doin' for good. Patron of the arts. But the goose that lays the golden eggs is Worth's Foundry and he'd got to do as brother Henry told him. Or else, no money. Not that he's not tried to make plenty elsewhere...."

"Elsewhere?"

The bookie prodded Littlejohn with a rigid forefinger.

"Customer of mine, for one thing. Backs the gegees like mad. Awfully unlucky. Lucky for me ... harharhar...."

Cruickshank almost coughed himself into a fit and ordered another double for himself and Littlejohn to brace him.

"... And when I was at the bank ... no breach of confidence to say it ... when I was at the bank, he was always overdrawn against next month's screw or next quarter's director's fees. I've heard he tries his hand on the Stock Exchange, too. He's desperate to make money and, somehow, can't do it any way but at the works.... But *Henry's* death won't do him much good.... Now, if somebody'd killed *Vera*.... That is the one who would have brought him the cash. Not that I *want* *Vera* killin'. Damn' fine woman, *Vera*. Bit standoffish, but damn' fine woman...."

Two of Cruickshank's cronies thereupon made a noisy entrance and invaded the Snug with loud shouts of joy at finding him there.

Littlejohn said it had been a pleasure to have a chat with him and made for the door.

"Don't go, Inspector. Want yer to meet a coupla friends o' mine...."

“Sorry, sir. Another time, if you don’t mind. I see Cairns is beckoning me. I’m expecting a telephone call and this will probably be it....”

“Righto ... glad to’ve metcher....”

The three topers got into a huddle about their next orders and Cruickshank’s voice could be heard telling them that that was the chap from Scotland Yard on the Worth case.

“Jolly decent fellah ... one of the best....”

“Thanks, Cairns,” said Littlejohn as they met out of earshot of the three boon companions. “Your suggestion got me the very information I wanted and you rescued me just in time.”

CHAPTER XVII

THE CASE OF VERA WORTH

IT needed the frank testimony of Vera Worth to complete the new theory Littlejohn had in mind. If what she said tallied with what he had deduced from the mass of information he had lately collected, his work was almost finished.

The butler was not on duty and Clara opened the door to the Inspector. Mrs. Worth was at home and received him at once. She was wearing a grey tweed costume and her hands were thrust deeply into the pockets of the coat. She did not offer to shake hands.

“I hope in time, Inspector, that you’ll have obtained enough information here, above and below stairs, to enable you to solve the so-called crimes. You’re a frequent visitor and no mistake.”

A fine welcome! But Vera Worth looked dead tired. Her nerves must have been at full stretch. Littlejohn wondered what was worrying her and keeping her awake at night.

“I think this will be the last time, Mrs. Worth, if you’ll give me your fullest help.”

“Sit down, Inspector. You still think both deaths were murders then?”

“Without a doubt. Don’t you?”

“Candidly, no. Both might easily have been accidents.”

“I’ll be candid, too, madam. I think for you to describe them as accidents is sheer wishful thinking....”

“And why, pray?”

Mrs. Worth had been writing letters. She closed the lid of the inkstand, put the pen in its place and swept a half-written sheet of notepaper into a drawer. Then she turned her chair in the direction of Littlejohn and settled herself with a semblance of interest.

“There’s no doubt whatever that Mr. Henry was killed by someone shutting him in the gas filled engine house. He couldn’t have fastened himself in the way we found things. There were signs of a frantic struggle to open the door and he had smashed a window in a vain attempt to get out....”

“Still, he might have been overcome and done all that in a sort of half-conscious daze....”

“Not in the opinion of medical experts and the police, madam.”

Mrs. Worth thrust her hands deep into her pockets again and stretched out her legs to the fire. She made a show of listening patiently.

“As regards Miss Rickson, I think she was killed because she knew who murdered Mr. Henry and accused him or her of it. She was going to see me again on the following morning and told the murderer so. So she was poisoned....”

“In my own opinion, Inspector, she either took the overdose by mistake or was so worried and harried by recent events, that she grew tired and deliberately took the easy way out.”

“You don’t seem to know Miss Rickson as well as some of the people I’ve interviewed. Nobody else thinks her capable either of a mistake of that kind—she was too careful—or of thinking of taking her own life—she was too religious.”

“Rubbish.... You can’t lay down hard and fast rules like that. The best and most careful of us suffer from depression or make mistakes. I think you’re making a mountain out of a molehill.”

Mrs. Worth took a cigarette from a box at her elbow and passed it over to Littlejohn. He gave her a light from his lighter.

“You sometimes called at the chemist’s in town and brought glucose home for Miss Rickson, didn’t you, madam?”

“Yes. She used it instead of sugar.”

“There was glucose in her sugar basin on the morning of her death. Into that glucose, I believe, the murderer put crushed veronal. Then, the job having been done, the basin was cleared of the tainted glucose and refilled. But the murderer thought it was sugar he or she had doctored! So sugar was put back in it....”

The cigarette slipped from Vera’s fingers and fell on the carpet. She picked it up and flung it in the fire absent-mindedly.

“I see. You’re sure that isn’t a theory, Inspector.... I mean, a kind of unsupported explanation of how it *might* have occurred?”

“I assure you, Mrs. Worth.”

There was a silence. A piece of coal fell with a tinkle on the hearth. Outside, in the gardens, some geese set up a loud honking.

Littlejohn guessed from the dilation of her finely chiselled nostrils, that he had got a shot home to Mrs. Worth. She took a fresh cigarette from the box and turned it over and over, tapping each end alternately on the table, until Littlejohn offered his lighter again.

“What do you want to know from me, Inspector?” she said at length.

Now or never, thought Littlejohn.

“Has it ever struck you, Mrs. Worth, that up to quite recently, you too might have been the victim of a poisoner ... a slow poisoner?”

Her fine eyes opened wide.

“What!!!”

And then she laughed. Nervously and without humour.

“How many more cases do you want on your hands, Inspector? You seem to have a bee in your bonnet....”

“You have recently been under Dr. Watterson for gastritis?”

“Yes. What of that?”

“Gastritis and arsenic poisoning have many symptoms in common.”

Another shot reached home! Littlejohn followed it quickly with a third.

“You know your dog was poisoned, Mrs. Worth.... The one which was taken seriously ill and didn’t recover after drinking your breakfast tea.”

“What do you know about the dog?”

She was considerably easier to get on with now. Either she had seen some hitherto unsuspected menace threatening her, or else she was anxious to confirm her own theories.

“I know more than you think, Mrs. Worth. Suppose you tell me what you know yourself about it.”

“You know, Inspector, I’m changing my mind about you. Hitherto, I’ve thought you were a bright lad from Scotland Yard out to get a conviction willy-nilly and setting out to badger everyone to death until somebody confessed. And I could see that sort of thing going on for months and months ...”

“Those aren’t our usual methods you know, Mrs. Worth....”

“To return to the dog. Or shall I begin at the beginning? I think I’ll make a confidant of you. Maybe, you already know all I have to tell you. At any rate, I’m heartily sick of the whole of this family business. It’ll do me good to get it off my chest. I daren’t tell my father; it would kill him right out. And my brother would just go berserk and murder somebody else....”

This lonely woman was not quite so proud and invulnerable as she appeared at first sight. She had some fear in her mind and had now, in the big Scotland Yard man, found what might be a protector. She shivered as an idea struck her.

“I’d better tell you, Inspector. Who knows? I may be the next victim....”

Littlejohn rubbed it in.

“*That* has also crossed my mind, Mrs. Worth.”

“William Worth married me to show that he was as good as the gentry. He told me that on our wedding night. He lent my father money until he had him absolutely in his power. Then, he suggested marrying me. Father wouldn’t hear of it; but I didn’t mind. I was tired of living as we had done at home. Cheeseparing, dodging the tradesmen, selling things and raising mortgages. I said I didn’t mind marrying him. He couldn’t last for ever, and he said he’d leave me well off when he died....”

She didn’t say anything about the man she had wanted marrying her sister. Her pride protected her there.

“... William Worth was a beast. So were his sons.... I may as well say it.... They couldn’t take their eyes off me from the start. The old man knew it, too. He taunted me with it. Revelled in the situation he’d created. Gerald was the quiet, crafty one. He hadn’t the guts to cross his father and try to start trouble. But Henry ... well ... he and I became quite good friends and went about together a bit. After all, I was his stepmother....”

She laughed again. A hard, dry, half-hysterical laugh. Littlejohn began to realize how near to breaking point she was.

“... William Worth got to know. There wasn’t anything he didn’t hear of. He struck me that night. I’d had enough. I was ready to pack up and clear out.... Then, he took pneumonia and, as is often the case with those who boast of their strength, he went out like the snuff of a candle.”

Vera had now got going properly and needed no persuading to unburden herself. The flood gates were down....

“William had planned a thorough revenge. He paid me out properly for daring to smile on Henry. He left me all he’d got in trust and the family couldn’t touch his fortune until my death. One by one they began to hate me. Henry left me high and dry at once and was barely civil. Life became a hell. I once thought of renouncing the trust and letting them have it; then I thought of clearing off altogether. But I thought again. Why should I? If they’d be decent to me, I’d share out....”

Her eyes blazed.

“... They just couldn’t, however, with me standing between them and all that wealth. Even Alice, who hadn’t been so bad until then, because she, too, had contracted a comic marriage, started to avoid me. Henry seemed to have as much money as he needed. He got cool with me, I think, because he’d been made a fool of by his father and people laughed at him a bit. Gerry was as cold as ice. Never a word ... Icily polite, that’s all. We just managed to tolerate each other. You’d have thought the sons would have packed off and lived elsewhere. But the Will provided for the family residence here.... You see, the house was theirs in trust, too. Gerald seemed hard up and probably couldn’t afford another establishment. Alice and her husband are as poor as church mice. We compromised somehow. I went to stay with father for long periods. The rest, too, took spells away. Now I see why Henry stayed on.... He was poisoning me.... He couldn’t have cleared me out of the way if he hadn’t stayed on, could he?”

“Why do you think he was poisoning you?”

“You’ve said so ... and I know, too. At first, I thought it was gastritis. So did the doctor. Then, one morning, as my tea was being brought in, Clara opened the bedroom door and then went off for biscuits, leaving it ajar. She’d left the tray on a table outside and, through a mirror in my wardrobe, I saw a hand change the teapots ... a man’s hand....”

“Could you only see the hand?”

“Yes. The glass reflected the table and about a foot above it. I couldn’t make out which of the men it was.... I wondered what was happening. Then I remembered the gastritis. Was somebody giving me something? I’d never suffered from stomach trouble before. So, I tried the tea on the dog. I never liked that dog. Give me a spaniel any day. I gave him two saucers of the tea. The result you know! I had the tea analysed. Arsenic!....”

She paused. Littlejohn guessed from the way she was breathing that she was terrified, although outwardly she was calm enough.

“... I remembered the gun burst, which had puzzled me, for I’m most careful as a rule. Someone was deliberately trying to kill me. And it was one of the family!”

“Why did you pick on Henry, though? Might have been Gerald or Alice.”

“No. Bancroft, the butler, is an old servant of my family. I brought him with me. He and Miss Rickson were the only decent friends I had in the house. One night, Bancroft had been to town ... it was the night the dog died to be exact ... and took the short cut through the wood. It was moonlight and as he neared the tree where earlier in the day Matthews had buried the body, he saw someone digging. He crept quietly towards the spot, well concealed by the bushes, and discovered that the busy man was Henry! He was removing the traces of his attempted crime. When he’d unearthed the dead dog, he packed the body in a suit case and took it away with him.”

“Is that all you based your suspicions of Henry on?”

“Yes. Why? Isn’t it enough?”

Littlejohn made no reply. The time wasn’t ripe.

“And then, Mrs. Worth. What did you decide to do?”

“I made up my mind to pack up and leave Trentvale Hall at once. I’d arrangements to make, of course, and it took a day or two. Then ... Henry died.... Well ... the menace seemed removed. I just stayed on until things were squared up after the funeral. But I’m making preparations to go back and live with father. I can’t stay on here. I’ve had enough.”

“Have you told the family, yet?”

“No. I only talked it over with father yesterday. I got back here late last night and they’d breakfasted and gone about their business when I got down this morning.”

“Then, Mrs. Worth, I beg of you, say nothing about it until I give you the word....”

“But why?”

“For your own safety. I do assure you that Miss Rickson was murdered by the same person who killed Henry Worth. If you let it be known that you’re moving out of the orbit of the killer’s activities, you’ll be struck down before you can do so. No; wait for my instructions, if you please.”

“Very well. I promise. But ...”

She was obviously completely bewildered.

“There’s another matter on which I really must rebuke you, Mrs. Worth....”

“Indeed....”

She was now quite jocular, as though a burden had been lifted from her shoulders, and faced the Inspector’s simulated annoyance with a smile.

“You’ve caused the police a lot of trouble through the alibi you concocted to cover your meeting with your brother at the time of the murder....”

“How did you know that?”

“I met your brother the other night and got the whole tale from him....”

“You met Stanley? You do get about, Inspector. I’m beginning to admire your powers of detection. You’ve got all the answers. He gave me an alibi, God bless him!”

“Yes. But I’m not saying that it was entirely satisfactory. How do I know that the pair of you didn’t concoct the tale after you’d told your brother about Henry’s attempts on your life? And that the two of you had made off and gassed him....”

“We didn’t, Inspector. Take it from me. We wouldn’t have used that sort of method....”

“I’ll take your word for it then, Mrs. Worth, for the time being. I’m afraid you’ll find your friends the Wattersons a bit stiff with you when next you meet. I hauled the doctor thoroughly over the coals for his share in the alibi. He’ll not forget it for a bit.”

“Poor old Watty! He only did it to help me.”

“A *quid pro quo* for the loans you’ve been making to him....”

“Really, Inspector, you must be a mind reader. You’ve got a terrifying knowledge of all the facts.”

“Did anyone overhear you making arrangements to meet your brother?”

“All the family were in. He rang up just after dinner the second time he ‘phoned. I took it in the hall, but anybody who’d wanted could have overheard us.”

“I see. And now I’ll tell you something, if you’ll say nothing about it. I think you should know it....”

“I promise then.”

“Henry wasn’t trying to kill you. He was trying to prevent it. That’s why he was murdered....”

“But ...”

“He dug up the dog and had it examined. Making sure ... or confirming his suspicions.”

“I see I’m not safe yet.”

“Not by a long chalk, Mrs. Worth. But trust the police now. By this evening, I hope to remove the threat altogether. Will you meet me at the ‘Rod and Line’ about eight o’clock? I want you to help me lay the killer by the heels....”

“I certainly will, Inspector. I’ll be there.”

“I’ll arrange with Cairns for us to have a quiet room in which to arrange everything. Kane will be there, too.”

“A chaperon?”

“Call him that if you like, but he’s going to take a principal part in the game.”

“You’re sure I’ll be safe until then, Inspector?”

“Quite sure. But don’t stay indoors or alone. Go over and see your father again ... or else spend the afternoon making peace with the Wattersons....”

“Very well. I’ll go down to town as you do. I’ll give you a lift in the car.”

“Thanks. Above all, don’t, until I tell you, mention leaving the Hall. Where are Miss Alice and the Count, by the way?”

“Gone to see some friends in Upper Trentbridge. They’ll be back for dinner.”

“Mr. Gerald’s at the works, I guess.”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s all, I think, Mrs. Worth. Except that perhaps you can help me on the matter of veronal in connection with Miss Rickson’s death. I understand that several members of the family had it prescribed by one doctor or another for sleeplessness. If they’re all out, we could just check up on their stocks.”

“Search the rooms, you mean,” said Vera with a sparkle in her eye.

“Yes, although probably you’ll know just where to lay your hands on it.”

“I don’t. But Clara will. She knows all that goes on in this house.”

“Not *all*, I’m afraid. Otherwise I wouldn’t be here.”

“I’ll ring for her.”

Littlejohn already had a staunch ally in the pretty young maid and she needed no persuading to fall in with the plan for searching for drugs.

Miss Rickson, Count Châteaulœuf and Henry had all had stocks. Miss Rickson's had been checked. They quickly sought the other two.

Alice and her husband had a bathroom of their own. Clara went straight to the medicine cupboard in this and produced a phial containing half a dozen tablets.

"This doesn't seem to have been bothered with," said Clara. "The Count 'ad some on the night he had his last fit. I put this bottle away then. I didn't count the tablets, but they seem about the same now...."

"Thank you, Clara. Now for Mr. Henry's."

"I put those away, too, last time 'e used them. Left them on his bedside table. I put 'em in his collar drawer."

Clara led the way to the now disused and ghostly room, and went straight to a drawer in a large wardrobe.

"They're not here!" she said after frantically hunting. They set to and made a thorough search which revealed nothing.

Littlejohn turned to Vera.

"I didn't expect to find them here. I know a more likely place, though."

"Where?"

"Your bedroom, Mrs. Worth!"

Vera flushed scarlet.

"Are you insinuating ...?"

"No. But this is quite in keeping with what has happened. Let's try."

Vera led the way back along the corridor to her own room. It was a large, light place, with a bathroom of its own, too. Thick carpet on the floor and a general air of efficient tidiness. The window looked on the front lawn and was open. A smell of burning leaves was on the air, for in the background an under gardener was busily clearing up. Somewhere in the distance, cars were humming along a main road. The clock over the stables struck four.

Mrs. Worth began to search for the bottle, her face again expressing the forced patience of one who acts merely to satisfy the whim of a third party.

Clara could be heard tinkering in the bathroom cabinet, and then came back, having drawn a blank.

Vera was busy at the drawers, carefully turning over garments and odds and ends. No veronal phial came to light.

Littlejohn's eyes travelled round the room. If his theory held water, the tablets would have to be hidden in some comparatively easy spot ... as when children play hunt-the-slipper, those not so big or bright are favoured by easy hiding places.

In front of the window stood a mahogany table. On it a silver cigarette box and a white ash tray, surmounted by an ornamental figure in faience. Littlejohn strolled over and lifted first the box which he examined inside and out; then the tray.

The base of the ash tray was hollow and down one side ran a long ridge like a trough. In this, wedged securely with a wad of paper, was the veronal phial.

"Was that Mr. Henry's?" said the Inspector to the flabbergasted Clara. "Don't touch it! There may be fingerprints."

"That's it, sir."

"But, Inspector, I don't understand...."

Vera Worth looked at Littlejohn with a mixture of surprise and apprehension.

"I didn't put it there...."

"I know you didn't," replied the Inspector. "Whoever did, must think the police are fools."

Vera Worth's relief at the turn of events was obvious. She had evidently for a long time been bearing a heavy burden of trouble and fear alone.

"Thanks for your help, Mrs. Worth," said Littlejohn as they parted. "I'll see you later."

"Yes. And thank *you* for all you're doing. I never had the old saying brought home to me more pointedly than this afternoon."

"What's that, madam?"

"Your police are wonderful."

Whereupon she let in the clutch of her car and was off.

CHAPTER XVIII

RED HERRING

IT was tea time when Littlejohn arrived at Trentbridge police station.

Inspector Kane was drinking from a thick cup and eating burnt bread masquerading as toast. His tea was hot and he had, in the privacy of his room, been sipping it out of the saucer. When Littlejohn tapped at the door, he hastily emptied his tea back into his cup and pretended that he was clearing up the slops. His mouth was full, his cheeks swollen with food, and his neck and face red with the heat generated by his drink and emotion of being caught in a vulgar act. He had just had a strong emotional shock as well.

Until he could make a way for his voice through his tea and toast, Kane waved his free hand to show that he was particularly wanting the attention of his colleague. He picked up a piece of dirty paper from the mass of official forms and soiled blotting paper on his desk and passed it to Littlejohn.

“Wuff ... wuff ... Ahem.... Glad you’re here. Just got that by afternoon post. What d’you think of it ...?”

Gummed to the paper, which was a telegram form apparently taken from a post office rack, were a number of words cut from a newspaper.

WHO KILLED HENRY WORTH. ASK CUTHBERT BARTLETT WHERE HE WAS AT TIME OF THE MURDER. PRO BONO PUBLICO.

“Well, Kane, that beats the band! Anonymous, but I guess we’ll have to follow it up.... And just as I was getting ready for a busy night. I’ve a lot to tell you, too. But that can wait. Where’s the envelope?”

“Nothin’ doin’ there. Look at it....”

Cheap manila, such as can be bought anywhere. The address also composed of snippets from the newspaper.

INSPECTOR KANE
TRENTBRIDGE.

Postmarked Trentbridge the previous evening at nine o'clock.

"Fingerprints?"

"Millions of 'em," groaned Kane. "Looks as if every sorter and postman in the town's 'ad hold of it. No doubt it's been passed round as a curiosity...."

"You might have that tested, too, will you?"

Littlejohn handed over the ash-tray with the veronal bottle still tucked away beneath it. He had carefully wrapped it in a piece of tissue paper supplied by Clara.

"What's this?"

"That's the veronal bottle used in Miss Rickson's case."

"Eh? Where d'you find this?"

"Do you mind, Kane, if I tell you later? I want to get this blessed Bartlett chap out of the way. I've to have a serious talk with you after, and I'll let you know everything then."

Kane looked glum and nodded his head.

"Can't expect to follow the workings of your mind, Littlejohn. Not used to complications of this sort ... leave it to you ..." he mumbled.

"You've done nothing about this letter, I presume."

"No. Only got it ten minutes before you came in. Have a cup o' tea?"

"No thanks. I'll just rush along and try to catch this fellow and hear what he has to say."

"No use trying to find out anything about the letter. The writer or whatever you like to call him ... chap with the scissors, is more like ... had an easy job. All the words were in the day before yesterday's edition of our local rag. Report of Henry Worth inquest. He's only needed to fill in Bartlett's name in ink in a disguised hand...."

"So I see. Well I'll be off. See you later."

On the way to North Trentbridge Littlejohn overtook Veronica Bartlett walking home—something unusual for her.

“I’m just going up to see your father again, Miss Bartlett,” he said.

The girl fell in step, equalling Littlejohn’s swinging strides with her own. She was dressed in a Harris tweed costume with a rakish felt hat. Pretty as a picture if only she’d been herself. Instead, she looked ready to undulate on the set of a film with a sporting theme.

“Whatever has he been doing again?”

Her enunciation was matchless.

“Oh, I just want to ask him one or two questions I missed at noon....”

A thought struck him.

“Where were you on the night Mr. Henry Worth died, Miss Bartlett?”

The girl with red hair tucked a stray lock away under her hat and hesitated.

“At home after nine o’clock.... Actually, I was alone until about half-past twelve. Daddy was out.... I went to bed at eleven. I had nothing on and I’d seen the pictures....”

“Where were you before nine o’clock?”

Again a pause. The girl was getting flustered and the mask of her chosen prototype began to give way. Her colour increased, and then drained away.

“I went out with Mr. Henry....”

She said it in a hushed, guilty voice.

“Oh yes?”

“After work, he suggested we went for a meal to the ‘Dog and Partridge’—that’s a roadhouse on the North Road. So I said all right and we started straight away. Nothing wrong. We just had a meal and then went for a run in the car to Aldhouse ... a pretty village about five miles away. We had to get back early. It was Mr. Henry’s turn at firewatching.”

“Had you been out with him before, Miss Bartlett?”

“Actually, I hadn’t. He’s given me lifts home, of course, but I’ve never spent any time out like that before....”

“Did your father know?”

“When I got in, he made me tell him. He was furious. But daddy’s a bit jealous and old fashioned. Actually, I’m all he’s got, you see.”

They had reached the gate of Itlldoo.

“Funny name,” said Littlejohn, wincing as he read it again.

“Absolutely gawstly. But the landlord won’t let us take it off the gate. Seems it’s the name in the deeds or some such nonsense. Actually ...”

The front door was flung open and there stood Bartlett, eyeing the pair of them, every muscle of his knotted frame tense. He must have thought that Littlejohn had fallen for his daughter and was seeing her home.

“What do you want again?”

Nostrils dilated and almost emitting flames, biceps rippling beneath his sleeves, chest thrown out aggressively, chin in, on guard.

“Another talk. This time with you, Mr. Bartlett.”

“Veronica ... go in and get tea. There’s watercress in the sink. I’ve grated the carrots and ...”

With a toss of her head the girl passed indoors. She evidently knew when and when not to heed parental orders. Somewhere the red light must have shown....

“... and as for you, we’ll say what we have to say right here,” continued Bartlett, barring the doorway with his rigid body.

“All the same to me, sir,” replied Littlejohn, good-humouredly puffing at his pipe. “I’ve only one question to ask you. Where were you at midnight on the night of Mr. Henry Worth’s death?”

“What the hell’s that to do with you ... you ... you ... meddling bobby....”

Littlejohn stared him straight in the eyes.

“I wouldn’t be silly if I were you, Mr. Bartlett. We know more of your movements than you think....”

Then he drew a bow at a venture.

“... You saw Mr. Henry Worth that night, didn’t you? In fact, you’d learned that he’d been taking your daughter out for the evening and went to tell him what you’d do to him if ...”

“That’ll do ... that’ll do.”

Bartlett clenched his fists and contorted his rugged face as though praying the gods to give him patience. His nose looked more than ever like a little snout.

“Why I’m telling you, I don’t know. You nor anybody else can’t force me. But I’ll tell you because let it be a lesson to you that nobody can trifle with my daughter without answering to me for it. Not even Mr. Henry Worth with his capitalist privileges ... not even King Dick....”

“All right, Mr. Bartlett. Let’s get on with it.”

“I went to see Mr. Henry Worth at the Hall. He’d gone firewatching, so I went to the works where I knocked on the private door of his office. He let me in and out that way. There was nobody else there. He was good and scared when he saw me....”

Bartlett postured like Discobolus in position number one.

“... I told him where he got off. Not that anything wrong had been done. But I knew his reputation ... and I wasn’t havin’ my Veronica mixed up with him. I told him that any more of it, and I’d take her away from the works and give him a damn good hidin’ in the bargain.”

Littlejohn got the impression that perhaps Veronica’s virtue was not the only matter at stake. Maybe Henry had been seducing her from her father’s iron regime and feeding her on roast beef and pork chops!

“What did he say?”

“He laughed. Said he’d just taken her out for a little meal in appreciation of her hard work ... encouragement like. If I took it that way, he’d see that I’d no reason for complaint again....”

“What time was that?”

“I got there just about half-past ten. Veronica came in about nine. I’d a job gettin’ out of her where she’d been. When she told me, I put on my things and off after Mr. Henry Worth, if you please. I’d a lost journey to the Hall. It was striking ten-thirty by St. Chad’s as I got to the works. What I had to say was short and to the point. I left about eleven.”

“Where were you until twelve-thirty, then, Mr. Bartlett?”

“Who told you I was out till then?”

“We have our sources of information....”

“I went for a walk. I was so furious that I knew I’d not be able to sleep unless I got some good fresh air and flushed my rage out of my blood.”

“H’m. Did anybody see you coming and going at the works?”

“No ... there was nobody about ... except a woman who seemed to be leading home a drunken husband.... They were too occupied with their own quarrelling and the like to see me.”

“That’ll be all then, thank you, Mr. Bartlett. I’ll leave you to get your tea....”

“I’ve had *my* tea, thank you for nothing. And I’ve only told you what I have to show I’ve nothing to hide and that if anybody tries to do any tricks

on me, I'll know the reason, or my name's not Bartlett. I don't care who it is ... monied or privileged classes, it's all the same to me. King Dick himself ..."'

Littlejohn left him standing rebelliously on his own threshold and wondered to himself on the way who King Dick might be.

He had not much time to spend at the "Rod and Line" but called in to arrange about his dinner and the room in which he and Kane would meet Vera Worth.

Cairns looked conspiratorial.

"Funny thing 'appened, this afternoon, sir," said the landlord when they had arranged their bit of business. "Ted Griffiths, the steward of the Gentlemen's Club 'ere—and an ex-member of the force, by the way—called in to ask me to change him a ten pound note. I gave him pounders for it. I was just twittin' him, like. 'Oho, Ted,' I sez, 'been backin' the hosses?' 'No,' sez 'e. 'Jest bin doin' one of my gentlemen a service, like.' 'Must a bin somethin' worth while ...' I goes on, fishin'-like. We police are always curious, aren't we, sir? 'Got it fer keepin' a still tongue in me head,' is all Ted'll say and off he goes. Generally free and easy, too. Now, sir, I wonder if that ten quid is part of the jiggery-pokery that's goin' on in this town...."

"You know, Cairns, I wouldn't be a bit surprised. Got the note with you?"

The landlord hurried to the bar and brought the bank note from the till. It was a new one, with a single series of number in the top left hand corner.

"Marks of the Home Counties Bank ... I keep my account there, so I oughter know," whispered Cairns hoarsely and pointed to the hieroglyphics with a fat forefinger.

"Lend me this, will you, Cairns? I'll see you get it back, or another like it."

"Sure, sir. Take it and welcome."

The Home Counties Bank had long been closed, but there were lights burning in the office. Littlejohn rang the bell and was admitted by a clerk who looked annoyed at the intrusion and astonished at the impudence of anyone calling so late. When he explained the reason of his visit and produced the note, he was cordially received.

It was a matter of minutes turning up the records.

The elderly first cashier, a grey headed, military man, near retiring age, consulted the manager. The manager, small, portly, well groomed, bald

headed, beamed through his gold framed spectacles like a jovial monk.

“That’s easy, Inspector,” he said, returning the note between two fingers. “It was issued yesterday to Mr. Gerald Worth … from the foundry, you know.”

CHAPTER XIX

SNAKES AND LADDERS

“WE’VE had our ups and downs in this case, but I’m beginning to see light at last,” said Littlejohn to Kane as they sat in the Inspector’s office again.

“Well, I wish you’d throw some in my direction,” mourned the local man. “I can’t make head nor tail of it.”

“It’s been like a game of snakes and ladders, Kane. You know, you get along like a house on fire, slowly travelling towards your goal. Then suddenly, you make a throw, and down the ladder you go, back a dozen squares and you have to pick yourself up and start again....”

Kane made throaty noises and looked as if he wondered whatever in the world the Scotland Yard officer was talking about. His eyes protruded questioningly reminding Littlejohn of an engraving of a man suffering from ophthalmic goitre in his medical dictionary at home.

Littlejohn sighed and felt he would be glad to get back to Hampstead and have a good laugh over his day’s adventures with his wife again. Kane was a decent fellow, but as heavy and unresponsive as a boiled pudding. An honest-to-goodness officer, serious and conscientious, but finding no humour or cause for lightheartedness in his labours.

Without the influence of Letty, thought Littlejohn, I might have been just such another....

“... You were saying that we were going to meet Mrs. Worth later in the evenin’. What’s it all about, Littlejohn, and what’s the state of the poll up-to-date?”

Littlejohn filled and lit his pipe, but let it go out.

“I’ll give you my own idea of how the thing happened....”

“What I want to know is ...” began Kane.

"I'll try to keep events in order of time ... a sort of sequence and if you don't follow anything, just butt in and ask about it."

Littlejohn lit his pipe again and, to his surprise, Kane unbent to the extent of taking a huge curved briar from his drawer, filling it laboriously from a tin and then lighting it with such fervour that he filled the whole room with a fog of coarse tobacco smoke.

"The whole thing begins with the second marriage of William Worth. He's a headstrong old man who hasn't been treated as he thinks he ought to have been by the county folk of Trentshire. He's wealthy and thinks his money ought to buy everything...."

"He's grown tired of his family. His two sons are bachelors and his only daughter's married a penniless and brainless French count, who's neither use nor ornament."

For the first time since the two officers had met, Kane burst into hoarse laughter, neighing like a horse and swallowing smoke which terminated his mirth in fits of convulsive coughing.

"At last the old man finds a way of getting his own back on both the gentry and his family. He's put the Underhills under an obligation to him by lending them money to pay off mortgages. Then he proposes to one of the daughters, Vera. She is suffering from the effects of being recently crossed in love. To spite her face, she cuts off her nose.... She marries William Worth and comes to live at Trentvale Hall."

Kane removed his pipe and Littlejohn re-lit his own.

"I know all that, an' a lot more besides," said the Trentbridge Inspector.

"I'm just sketching in the background.... Vera Worth is a very handsome woman. Furthermore, she's younger than the three Worth children to whom she's become stepmother! The two sons find her very attractive at first. She's a novelty in the home, a charming woman. The only snag is she's married to the old man, and his eyes are on them all the time. Gerald behaves himself, but soon, Henry and Vera are the best of friends. In fact, they get knocking around together. Some people even say they're lovers...."

"Probably they were right at that...."

"Be that as it may.... Old William knows what's going on. He taunts his wife and soon begins to ill-treat her. She's got to the far end and is ready to leave him, when, unexpectedly, he gets a chill, pneumonia, and dies.

“But that’s not the end of William by any means. He’s made arrangements for a pretty revenge to begin with his death. By his Will he leaves all his large fortune to his wife, Vera, in trust. She’s to have the income and when she dies the money goes to his family. Think of it! Vera in the prime of life and each member of the family older than she is! Could anything be more diabolical?”

“The old swine....”

“Especially when you remember that with the exception of Henry, who has a flair for invention and makes a good income from it, the Worths have little of their own except shares in the foundry and those only in very limited numbers. Alice and her Count just manage to get along by living with first the father, then Vera at the Hall. Gerald’s not much better off, for he has big ideas about his style of living and hates the work he’s compelled to do at the foundry through force of circumstances.”

“Vera immediately becomes unpopular with the family, of course. Who wouldn’t when she stands between them and about two hundred thousand pounds? The Will has provided for residence at the Hall of the Worth survivors, so she can’t turn them out....”

“Henry, from being fond of Vera, begins to avoid her. Gerald is icily polite. Alice and the Count have as little to do with her as they can. Then, things begin to happen.

“First of all, Vera has a gun accident. She’s a girl who’s been brought up to use a gun from childhood and has a respect for her twelve-bore. I’ve seen a pair of guns she owns. They were in beautiful condition. But the barrels of one had been shattered by the accident; the other was perfectly kept—as clean as a new pin. The accident was due to one of the barrels being choked with what looked like grey clay. You might expect a greenhorn to ill-treat a weapon, but never to stick it, barrels downwards, in the earth and let the wad dry like a brick....

“Somebody stopped up the barrel with moulder’s sand from the foundry, hoping that when she fired the gun, the explosion would fatally injure her....”

“Ah! Mr. Henry took moulder’s sand from the works, Littlejohn! But what the ... He was the one who was murdered....”

Kane halted in confusion.

“Henry took sand to compare it with samples he’d taken from the damaged gun, like I did. And he reached the same conclusion. Somebody was trying to get Vera out of the way of that two hundred thousand pounds.

“But Henry didn’t do that until after another event which aroused his suspicions. Vera started with stomach trouble, which in my view wasn’t gastritis at all. It was slow arsenic poisoning!”

Kane’s pipe had gone out. His mouth opened like that of a fish gaping through the glass of its bowl.

“One morning, things came to a head. Vera’s dog died from drinking tea from a pot that had been brought to her bedroom. Whilst in bed, she was surprised to see through the open door, reflected in a mirror, a hand—she couldn’t see anything else—change her teapot, which the maid had left standing on a table in the corridor whilst she got some biscuits. As a precaution, she tried it on the dog. The dog died.

“But somebody else had seen the incident. Whether or not Henry heard something going on outside his room, where the table stood, or was coming from the bathroom and spotted what was happening, we don’t know. But the death of the dog scared him so much that, after it had been buried, he went and dug it up by night, took samples of arsenic from the stocks of weed killer, and had an expert examine them. It was confirmed that the dog had died from the same brand of arsenic as was contained in the weed killer.

“Meanwhile, Vera had also been to the experts, who had analysed some of the contents of the teapot and told her the same story. She was terrified and prepared to pack up and leave for her father’s home at once. This, however, was prevented by the death of Henry.

“Now, Vera believed Henry was the one who was trying to kill her. She felt safe in staying on, therefore, until matters arising from his death had been squared up. Then she was off. But the truth was, Henry was protecting her. It was for doing this that he met his own death. The real culprit was Gerald.”

“But … but … he’s got an alibi....”

“Wait a bit, Kane. Let’s see what happened after Henry confirmed what he suspected. Alice and the Count lived on the other side of the corridor from the rest of the family. He must have heard Gerald’s door close or something.... At any rate, he was fond of his sister and probably couldn’t

bring himself to believe she'd stoop to murder. Gerald was different, however.

"Mr. Gerald had big ideas and not enough money to carry them out. His means were very limited. He was accustomed to living well at the Hall and seeing his father squander money as he liked. He was educated at Oxford and got the taste for good things there, as well as a distaste for the foundry and all that it stood for. He was like a bird in a cage. All he wanted was for the door to open and to take wing and clear off....

"For years Gerald overspent his income from the foundry. He incurred overdrafts at the bank in anticipation of his salary and dividends. He backed horses and played the Stock Exchange in the hope of making a rapid fortune. Probably, he borrowed from friends, too. He ran a flat in London and there was a girl with it. He went down there from time to time and cut a dash among friends who, I suppose, sponged on him and quickly stripped him of all he'd got until next pay day. It's a wonder he didn't do something rash before."

"You've picked up a lot of stuff that I didn't know. Who's told you all that?"

"Friends of Gerald, rather talkative in their cups. Then, after he'd expected and perhaps even borrowed on his expectations from father, the old man gets married, and, to crown all, ties up his money and makes Master Gerald have to wait for the death of a girl younger than himself!

"Can you imagine what he felt like? As soon as he could do so without arousing suspicion, Gerald set about getting Vera out of the way. She's always out shooting. He's not much in that line himself but he's heard of guns bursting through obstructions in the barrels. He's seen the peculiar qualities of moulding sand and tries that as his means. The attempt fails because the stuff isn't hard enough and breaks up.... Vera, however, gets a bad shaking. Gerald has to look elsewhere.

"His mind turns to poisoning. He steals some of the gardener's weed killer and somehow manages to feed it to Vera in small doses. She goes to the doctor who diagnoses gastritis. Finally, he increases the dose. He puts it in her morning tea, but it doesn't come off, as we know. Instead, it puts Henry on his track. It takes Henry's mind back to the gun accident and there, if you ask me, Henry's suspicions turn to Gerald, for Alice and the Count would never have thought of using moulding sand. Henry was seen

with a sample in his office and was comparing it with some he'd taken from the moulding shop.

"When the ghastly truth dawned on Henry, he went for Gerald like a madman. They had some fearful rows which were overheard by Clara, the maid at the Hall, Miss Rickson, the secretary at the works and Miss Bartlett, Henry's so-called secretary.

"Miss Bartlett heard Henry say there was to be no more of it; it had got to stop. He faced Gerald with the reports on the dog and the arsenic.... The girl thought they were quarrelling about some defalcations in the books, but I've the word of Waghorn that Gerald couldn't have done it. He just didn't know how. Waghorn also told me they weren't speaking for days before Henry died.

"Clara, the maid at the Hall, overheard quarrelling, too. Henry was telling his brother that if he was hard up there was no excuse for *that*. *That*, according to my reckoning, was poisoning Vera.

"In other words, Kane, Henry had found Gerald out and looked like spoiling all his little plot. I'm not saying he'd have turned him over to the police; I don't know what Henry would have done if Gerald had persisted..."

"But why did Gerald murder him, if he wasn't in any danger?"

"There we have to look at the mentality of Gerald. He saw freedom in sight if he got rid of Vera. He'd get his share of the estate and spread his wings and be off. Then, along comes Henry and snatches away the prize. But the brother isn't going to give up so easily. He's another shot in his locker. If Henry is out of the way, the family can sell the works to a combine at a good profit. Gerald will get a thumping good rake off from his shares and achieve his ends that way. Not while Henry's alive, however. Worth's foundry is his life blood. He'll neither part with it, nor agree to the control passing from the family by sale of shares and, as managing director, his consent must be obtained before Gerald can dispose of his holding. Enraged at Henry's finding him out at his game with Vera and having his guilt to hold over his head, and frustrated at every turn by Henry's tyranny, Gerald decides to make an end to it. He kills Henry...."

Kane held up his huge paw like a traffic policeman controlling a crossing.

"The halibi," he said with portentous triumph.

“Hasn’t been properly investigated and that’s our next job.”

“But my men *have* checked it.”

“Agreed. But as I see things, there must be a flaw somewhere. We’ll find it before much longer.”

“I wish you luck, Littlejohn, but I ’aven’t much hope.”

“Let that pass, although it’s a big slice to swallow. Let’s look at Miss Rickson.”

“I was forgettin’ the poor old girl. Yes, what happened to her?”

“My visit put ideas in Miss Rickson’s head. She was more or less confined to her room at the Hall by old age and infirmities. She couldn’t bring herself to believe that anybody would kill her favourite, Henry. I put one or two points to her. I mentioned the gun accident ... and the matter of arsenic. After I’d gone, Miss Rickson got busy. Clara says she was very agitated. She questioned her about the death of the dog and paid an unaccustomed visit to the gun room. In her quiet retreat, Miss Rickson had a lot of time for thought and I dare say she knew more about the psychology of the family than anybody else. I couldn’t expect the family to tell me all that she said to them that night. We know she questioned them and asked Gerald ... so he says ... if he killed his brother. Actually, I think she *accused* him of it and told him why she thought him guilty. She’d been used to direct dealing with her one-time charges. This time, it cost her her life. Gerald just swept her away....”

“But what proof have we there?”

“Just this. Whoever poisoned the glucose didn’t know it *was* glucose, for he replaced it with sugar afterwards. The only people at the Hall not likely to know that Miss Rickson took glucose instead of sugar were Henry and Gerald. The women of the family, including Vera, were in the habit of getting it for her under doctor’s orders from the chemist’s. And at times, even the Count did. But Henry and Gerald weren’t concerned with minor domestic matters of that sort. *Infra dig.* Henry was dead, however. Gerald remained.”

“Well, well.... What a revelation. Nothing short of marvellous the way you’ve found it all out. I only hope the alibi cracks up. Though I doubt it. What’ll you do if it doesn’t?”

“Don’t let’s meet trouble half way. I want to tell you another thing, too. Gerald, you know, almost trapped us into accusing Vera of the crime....”

“Eh?”

“You remember when you wanted to swear out a warrant?” grinned Littlejohn and to prevent Kane’s discomfiture, he lit his pipe again, slowly, paying particular attention to the bowl.

“During the day, Henry accused Gerald of attempted murder. The night’s events which followed it might have been deliberately set to help Gerald. Vera’s brother rings up—and Vera tells me she made arrangements with him within the hearing of all the family—asking for an appointment with her at around midnight. He wanted to borrow money to meet a cheque he’d issued and couldn’t cover. When I saw him, he hadn’t got over the fright he’d given himself by impulsively issuing a dud cheque. Although Vera’d put him right at the midnight meeting, he thought when I turned up at Burton that something had gone awry after all and that I’d come to charge him with fraud. He confirmed the meeting.... Obviously a decent, straightforward chap, although I hear that he’s sown his wild oats in his time....”

“You’re tellin’ me.”

“Then again, the Count, who’s an epileptic, I understand, had an attack on the night Henry died and at midnight was missing from home. He’d wandered off in search of a drink, or something fantastic or other, and was found in the grounds of the Hall. Maybe, he might have gone and shut Henry in the engine house. But, Firebrace assured me it was a physical impossibility. Short of a physiological freak performance, therefore, he was out of it. But you see how it fitted. Vera had actually concocted a false alibi with the Wattersons to cover her brother, who was on a special mission and would have been for it had his C.O. got to know he was in Trent-bridge instead of London. The Count, too, had no alibi. And Henry was firewatching and known to take a turn outside at midnight on such occasions when it was fine....”

“The Gentlemen’s Club, where Mr. Gerald was playing billiards, is only two minutes from the engine house. In fact, the back door gives on to the store yard. Anybody with a key could have got into the yard and been and done the crime in about ten minutes. But, as I’ve said, three out of many men ’ave testified that Gerald was in the middle of a game of snooker when the thing was done,” interjected Kane, still pessimistically shaking his head.

“That’s our last fence and I hope we clear it. By the way, you didn’t inquire about the fingerprints on the ash-tray ...?”

Kane hurried from the room and was back almost at once. His face gave the answer.

“Not a thing.”

“I thought not. There again, Gerald tried to plant the phial on Vera and put it in a pretty obvious place ... not too easy, you know, but likely. The Hall’s crawling with veronal tablets, but this lot was stolen from Henry’s room.”

“And now, Littlejohn, suppose you do manage to break Gerald’s alibi. What then? It’s as good as Vera’s ... *and* the Count’s. Vera and her brother might ’ave made hers up. They might even have done in Henry. We’ve only old Firebrace’s opinion about the Count, too....”

“We’re going to test our theory to-night, Kane. *If* the alibi turns out spurious, we’re going to try an experiment. That’s the purpose of our meeting with Vera Worth. She’s going to announce to the family later, that she’s leaving the Hall to-morrow for good. Going to take up residence with her father. If Gerald wants to finish the job he’ll have to do something to-night. We’ll be there waiting for him if he does.”

“You’ve got it all taped, Littlejohn. I never knew such a chap in my life,” said Kane with genuine admiration in his tone.

A queer look, half mirthful, half embarrassed, appeared on Littlejohn’s face and he stooped and knocked out his pipe against the bars of the grate to hide it.

CHAPTER XX

AT THE GENTLEMEN'S CLUB

“WHAT about this thing?” asked Kane as they prepared to leave the police station. He brandished the telegram form with its message of paper clippings.

“That’s another thing we’ve got to look into. Bartlett was at Worth’s foundry just before the murder threatening what he’d do to Henry for trying to seduce his daughter. He candidly said so when I saw him just now. He also had no alibi to cover his movements afterwards. Went for a walk in the country, apparently to get rid of his rage. I don’t think he was likely to sneak up and shut Henry in the engine house. Tearing him limb from limb and scattering his body to the winds is more in redhead’s line.

“But there’s just one other thing we’ve got to clear up as well as the alibi whilst we’re at the club. Cairns at the ‘Rod and Line’, changed a ten pound note for the steward to-day....”

“Griffiths? One of our men on pension. He’ll talk if we ask him. Still very loyal to the force and proud of his record....”

“... All he’d tell the inquisitive Cairns was that it was for keeping his mouth shut. I was lucky in finding the bank still working. The manager told me that the note was issued to Gerald yesterday. Now, if as you say, Griffiths is proud of his record, he’s not the sort to be bribed into faking an alibi. What did Gerald give him the note for and why had he to keep mum? My guess is that he told Gerald that Bartlett was at the works on the night of the crime. That’s why Gerry sent us the telegram. Where Griffiths got the information from, I can’t think. We’ll find out if that’s the case.”

“But why send us an anonymous message like that? He might have known we’d see through it.”

“His second slip. The first was the murder of Miss Rickson. We’d no definite proof concerning who killed Henry. But the case is much blacker against him with Miss Rickson. He sent the message because he’d got the jitters. Why don’t we arrest Vera after all he’s done to incriminate her? There must be a hitch somewhere. Has she really produced a watertight alibi that’s satisfied us? In that case, we might turn our attention to *him*. So, having heard of Bartlett’s movements from Griffiths … mind you, this is just a theory … having heard that, he can’t bear to let the chance pass. He hands us the tip.”

“The sooner we see Griffiths the better....”

They found ex-P.C. Edward Griffiths finishing his tea in his private quarters at the Trentbridge Gentlemen’s Club. He had just polished off a large Welsh rarebit and was now in the midst of bread and jam.

Trentbridge seemed to teem with huge policemen, active and superannuated, but Griffiths was the biggest of the lot. As he rose from his feasting, Littlejohn seemed to shrink in height, for the man towered over him. His great girth kept others at a respectable distance from him. His face was like a pink full moon. His head was half bald, and the rest of the hair was clipped to the skin. His neck hung over his collar in great folds. He had a large grey moustache and bushy eyebrows, hands like hams and enormous feet.

He had outgrown his suit which was skin-tight. His jacket, in particular, looked as if he had been poured into it. It kept slipping up over his haunches and he yanked it back from time to time.

Ted Griffiths was a local character, greatly respected for his integrity and willingness. Although heavy and ungainly in body, he was remarkably quick and light on his big feet. The members of the club found him so useful in anything from preparing a meal to refereeing a billiards or cricket match, that they had twice increased his wages to prevent him from retiring. His family were always trying to persuade him to take it easy. It speaks well for Ted’s paternal authority, that he refused to heed them, for there were fourteen of them. Six boys and eight girls, all grown up, and twelve of them married. The great shame of Ted’s existence and one likely, unless removed, to bring down his grey hairs in sorrow to the grave, was the fact that hitherto, between them, they had only produced two grandchildren for him.

The steward was sitting at a considerable distance from the table on account of his paunch. He seemed to be suspended in thin air, for his huge form completely hid his means of support. As he rose, wiping his hands down the sides of his trousers, he disclosed a small chair which had an air of pathetic ill-treatment.

Griffiths got ponderously on his feet. The room seemed full of him. He took a drink of tea to clear his mouth and gulped.

“Evenin’, gentlemen,” he said without cordiality.

He disliked Kane who, he thought, had deliberately stood in the way of his promotion during his active days in the force, thereby cutting his pension.

Kane introduced the other two and Littlejohn shook hands cordially with the ex-constable. Thereupon Griffiths took a liking to him. Kane had never once in all the years done that. Here was somebody teaching him his manners, and a Scotland Yard man at that.

“Evenin’, sir. Like to sit down....”

“Thanks, Griffiths. We’re in a bit of a hurry, but have one or two points on which we’d like your help in the Worth case which we’re investigating.”

“Always ready to help,” beamed the steward, face shining with proud pleasure, pale blue eyes receding with smiles into their surrounding wrinkles of fat. One of his front teeth was missing. “Once a policeman, always a policeman.”

Kane snorted. He thought Griffiths was being a bit free. He stood stiffly, eyeing the mess of food on the table with disapproval. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell Griffiths to stand up when he was spoken to, but Littlejohn was sitting on the outraged chair himself with Griffiths now completely covering another of the same build.

“To come straight to the point then,” went on Littlejohn, puffing at his pipe. “What did Mr. Gerald Worth give you ten pounds for the other day?”

Large beads of sweat sprang like hailstones from the brow of Ted Griffiths. His first emotion was one of fear lest he should, unconsciously, have compounded a felony; the second was one of rage at Cairns for having blown the gaff on him....

An appetising blast of cooking cheese blew into the room from the kitchen.

Griffiths mopped his brow and lit a cigarette which seemed absurdly small stuck in his huge face. He suffered from smoker's cough and, as soon as he took his first puff, was seized with a violent paroxysm, which sent his whole mighty frame into an upheaval.

"I'll tell you that without the least hesitation, sir," he panted when the earthquake had subsided. "It's a matter of no account really. Just concerns Mr. Henry Worth meetin' a chap called Bartlett before he died, and havin' a row with him. Mrs. Peacop, the club charlady, 'appened to tell me that as her and her husband was passin' the foundry about eleven on the night o' Mr. Henery's death, she saw Bartlett, a Communist chap, leavin' the office on unpleasant terms. Quarrellin' like. Mrs. Peacop tells me, casual like, the follering mornin' and when Mr. Gerald comes in a day or two later, I jest mentions it, casual like, to him. Thought it might be of use...."

"Why didn't you let *me* know, Griffiths?" said Kane peevishly.

Littlejohn could have given him the answer from the way the ex-constable had of looking at his one time chief.

"Never thought another thing of it.... Jest thought it was gossip, till I see Mr. Gerald and even then, I jest told it him for somethin' civil to pass the time o' day. The way he took it, you could a' knocked me down with a feather."

"How did he take it, Griffiths?" asked Littlejohn.

"Looked funny at first, and then: 'Griffiths,' he sez, 'don't you be tellin' that to anybody.... Tell it to nobody,' he sez. 'Understand that? There's been enough scandal talked about my pore brother in this town the last few days without more. Jest forget it. Here's somethin' to help you. Won't help the police, our family, nor anybody else to go broadcastin' that. An' give this to the woman who saw 'em.'

"You could 'ave blown me down when he handed me a ten quid note for myself and a fiver for Mrs. Peacop!"

"Where can we find Mrs. Peacop?"

"In the kitchen now, sir. Lucky she comes to help clear up and cook the teas as well as clean up in the mornings. Mrs. Peacop! Mrs. Peacop!! Hey!!!"

From the kitchen there suddenly emerged a tall, bony, tired looking woman, wearing a dismal black hat and with her scrawny arms bare to the

elbows. She was drying them on a sopping cloth which she convulsively wrung in her hands as she was interviewed.

“Wot? I’ve got rarebits on ...” she said acidly.

“Turn out the gas fer a minute and come here, Mrs. Peacop. These police officers want a word with you.”

Mrs. Peacop’s bosom was braced high by corsets and as she clutched this in anguish there were loud creaking noises.

“Wot ’as ’e bin at agen?” she asked, in plaintive exasperation. With that she scuttered off, like a small-part actress who has said her say and seeks the wings again. There were popping noises as she put out the gas cooker. That night, the rarebits of her customers in the dining room were stringy and leathery and were the subject of many complaints. She re-appeared.

“Wot’s ’e bin at?” This time bellicosely, boding no good for the absent Peacop.

Financially and alcoholically, the absent Peacop was a constant source of anxiety to the faithful, hard working woman now facing the detectives.

Griffiths burst into loud laughter, which sounded like the whooping of a ship’s siren in a fog.

“It’s not your blessed ’erbert this time, Mrs. Peacop. A couple o’ policemen, yes ... but these is two Inspectors—one from Scotland Yard itself. Herbert ’asn’t rose to that honour yet....”

“You keep a civil tongue in yer ’ead, Ted Griffiths, and don’t yew dare run down my ’erbert in front o’strangers.”

The good woman’s fighting spirit was rising.

“That’s all right, Mrs. Peacop,” intervened Littlejohn. “Nothing of a personal or family nature.... We’re just seeking a bit of information from you. It was you who saw Mr. Bartlett and Mr. Henry Worth together on the night Mr. Worth died, wasn’t it?”

The daily help melted at once.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Tell us what happened then, please.”

Mrs. Peacop flung the tea towel through the open kitchen doorway and gripping her right elbow with her left palm and the left with the right, hugged herself until her stays creaked in protest.

“I suppose Ted Griffiths ’as told yer that me ’usband is partial to ’is drink....”

“Partial? Partial? Haw, haw, haw,” hooted the steward.

“You keep out o’ this. I’m talking to the gentleman.... Sometimes he takes a drop more than’s good for ’im. If I go with ’im, I can see as he behaves himself....”

She was pluckily standing between her Herbert and the criticism of the rest of the world. What she did to him when they were alone was their own business. Others interfered at their peril....

“That night, sir, we’d been to the ‘Hole in the Wall,’ a respectable hotel....”

“Respectable! Haw, haw, haw....”

“You shut up! *Respectable* I sez, don’t I? We spent the evenin’ quiet, havin’ a few drinks and ’erbert, who *can* sing, though I sez it meself, gave a few songs....”

“My gawd!”

“Look ’ere, Ted Griffiths....”

“All right, Mrs. Peacop. Go on. Keep out of this, Griffiths, please.”

“That’s right, sir. Our way ’ome lays past Worth’s foundry. We stayed on finishin’ our drinks for a bit past closin’ time at hal’-past ten. St. Chad’s ’ad jest struck eleven as we passed the foundry. The door of the offices was open an’ a light on. That’s what caught our eye, like, it bein’ black-out. ‘They’ll be ’aving the A.R.P. after ’em,’ sez ’erbert to me. ‘They will that,’ I sez back. Then, we see two men talking. ‘That’s Mr. Henry,’ sez me ’usband, him working at the foundry as labourer in the stores. ‘Oo’s ’e got with ’im?’ I sez.”

“Yes?”

““Why, it’s ole Bartlett, the one as useter box an’ wrestle at the athletic club,’ sez ’erbert. An’ so it was. An’ him and Mr. ’enry was ’aving a few words, I can tell yer.”

There was a wealth of meaning in the deliberate understatement.

“What were they saying, Mrs. Peacop?”

“I’m comin’ to that....”

“Better be quick.... Them rarebits ’ll be in lovely condition if you goes on at this rate....”

“Griffiths, please!”

“That’s right, sir, keep ’im in ’is place. ‘An’ don’t yew come ’ere threatenin’ me at this time o’ night agen. I’ve somethin’ better to be doin’,’

sez Mr. Henry. ‘Yew don’t give me cause, then,’ ups and sez Bartlett as brazen as brass. ‘Next time it’ll not be words, it’ll be deeds,’ or somethin’ like that, sez Bartlett. ‘Yew’ll be an ’ospital case....’ ‘Be off with yer,’ sez Mr. Henry and shut the door. With that we goes on, sir.”

“And you told Griffiths here?”

“Yes, sir. And you could ’a knocked me down with a feather when ’e comes later and sez Mr. Gerald wants it keepin’ quiet as it’s disrespectful to ’is brother’s memory to talk scandal after he’s gone. As if I would.... Anyway, he gives me two pounds....”

Under the questioning eye of Littlejohn and Kane’s withering scrutiny, the ex-policeman wilted, shrank and almost took to his heels to get away. Instead, he thrust his hand into his trousers pocket, extracted three crumpled pound notes and passed them to Mrs. Peacop.

“Wot’s these?” gasped the good woman.

“Second instalment,” rumbled Griffiths sheepishly.

Their eyes met. Griffiths’s face grew mottled as though he had been severely slapped on both cheeks and forehead.

“Why, you ... you ...” hissed the woman and, as if to prevent herself from doing violence to Ted, rushed into the kitchen, where she could be heard lighting the gas and furiously rattling cooking utensils.

“I wanted to be sure she did keep quiet before givin’ her the lot,” said the steward in an effort to cover himself. He shrugged his shoulders and rolled pieces of bread on the table into small dirty pellets.

“Now, Griffiths,” continued Littlejohn. “This must be kept to yourself.... Where are the two men, among others, who gave Mr. Gerald his alibi on the night of the crime? Are they here now?”

“Mr. Wortlye and Mr. Hipton ...” interposed Kane.

“Yes, sir. I was there, too. Markin’ for the games and servin’ drinks. Mr. Gerald was here all the time.... Well into the mornin’ about one o’clock, he left. When the others went. We generally close about then.”

“And they were actually in the middle of a game?”

“Finished one about quarter to twelve and then ... lemme see.... Yes. Mr. Gerald played the first with Mr. Wortlye. That finished about a quarter to twelve. Then he took on Mr. Hipton after they’d ’ad a drink or two, in between like.”

“What time did they begin the second game?”

"About twelve fifteen, I'd say. Drinkin' an' talkin', they were. I was busy at the bar just then, but I saw 'em all together."

"Get hold of Mr. Wortlye, alone, please, and bring him here, will you? Now quietly.... We don't want all the club chattering about our being here. Mr. Gerald Worth isn't here, is he?"

"No, sir. A bit too soon for him. Mr. Wortlye finishes early. He's Director of Education, you know."

Griffiths left the room and shortly returned followed by a small thin man, with a face like an Old English sheep dog, for he had thick unruly grey hair on top, a strong, short, shaggy beard to match, and heavy disorderly eyebrows. He walked with a peculiar gait like one climbing a ladder. Mr. Wortlye frowned as he entered, nervously fingered a corded pince-nez hanging from his neck and then clipped it on his nose.

"Evening, Inspector," he said to Kane, who introduced him to Littlejohn.

"We're just checking alibis in connection with the Worth case, sir," said Littlejohn. "Could you give a little more precise details of that of Mr. Gerald Worth? You were with him between say eleven-thirty and twelve-thirty on that night?"

Mr. Wortlye looked searchingly over the top of his glasses and cleared his throat.

"Longer than that! Longer than that! But for your purposes, that'll do, I guess. Yes. We were together all the time."

"Can we go over the details of how you spent the time?"

"Certainly.... Gerald and I played a game of snooker till, say, quarter to twelve. We keep our eye on the clock at that time, you know. Got to think of work the day after.... At quarter to twelve we finished. Gerald won. I paid for drinks."

"Did you take them right away?"

"No. We sort of made the usual post-mortem of the game.... Then, I ordered the drinks from Griffiths here. Didn't I, Ted?"

"You did, sir."

"While we were waitin', we talked again ... oh, and yes. We adjourned to the lavatories...."

"How many of you?"

"Gerald, myself and Hipton, who said he'd take Gerald on next. Then we came back and had our drinks. They started their game about twelve-fifteen.

I know that, because I left 'em at it at about half-past when I went home."

"Let's get this a bit clearer. How long were you in the lavatories, sir?"

"A few minutes, that's all. Now, let me see.... Yes, we left Gerald there. He was away about ten minutes...."

Littlejohn could scarcely hide his excitement. He daren't look Kane full in the face, lest an exchange of glances should give the game away, but he could hear his colleague's sharp intake of breath.

"If you're thinking his alibi's no good on that account, Inspector, don't. Because the door of the washroom opens on to the billiards room. He couldn't have sneaked out without our seeing him."

"That was the only brief period when Mr. Gerald was out of your sight during the time in question?"

"Yes. I couldn't very well follow him into one of the cabinets, could I?"

Wortlye cackled and blew into his beard.

"That was, let us say, between twelve o'clock and ten past?"

"Yes...."

"Thank you, sir. I must ask you to promise not to divulge to anyone the subject of this interview."

"I promise, of course.... You don't mean to say ... Gerald?"

"No, sir. Purely routine."

"I thought! Well, I'll be off...."

He stumped out, swinging his pince-nez between his fingers.

"Now, Griffiths ... Mr. Hipton, please. And don't forget. No fuss."

"Trust me, sir."

"Well ... I'll be damned! It's in the bag ..." said Kane when they were alone.

"Looking a bit brighter, Kane. But not for Mr. Gerry."

Frederick Hipton, largest draper in Trentbridge, entered. He did not seem to have full control of his limbs, for he swung his long arms loosely as he came and apparently had difficulty in directing his short, stumpy legs in the direction he wanted to go. He approached the police officers with a rolling gait, clapped his hands together and started to rub them.

"Now, gentlemen, what can I do for you?"

He had a large and sandy haired head, which he held on one side, almost as though suffering from a deformity. A huge bulbous nose, straggling

sandy moustache and crafty green eyes. Hardly to be trusted to keep a secret unless it paid him....

“We’re just confirming alibis in connection with the Worth case, sir. I wanted to check that you were with Mr. Gerald Worth between eleven-thirty and twelve-thirty on the night his brother died.”

“Yes, I was. Why? Is he suspected?”

“No, Mr. Hipton. Just routine.... That’s all, thank you very much.”

“But ...”

Hipton shrugged his shoulders, looked at the policemen as though critical of their efficiency and shambled out.

Kane raised his eyebrows.

“Why did you ...?”

“Don’t trust him. He’ll promise to keep quiet and then, as soon as Gerald arrives, he’ll tell him. A toady....”

“Come to think of it, you’re right. What now?”

“Let’s have a look at the lavatories, Griffiths. Anyone playing in the billiards room?”

“Only one table, sir. Things don’t get going there until after eight when the members drift in.... This is a good time.”

They made their way through the billiards room. A well kept place with five tables and a bar at one end. The evening light was draining through the glass roof. A door in the wall led to the washroom. Griffiths piloted them through. Two men were playing billiards on one of the tables, but were too immersed in their game to pay much attention. Through an open door at the far end came the sounds of voices. There, a boy was serving light teas prepared by Mrs. Peacop. Already, the rarebits were calling forth adverse comments....

“Right, Griffiths, we won’t detain you. I guess you’re busy time’s just starting. See you later,” said Littlejohn.

At this broad hint, the steward withdrew, somewhat reluctantly, with slow feet.

The lavatories, well constructed in white tiles, were spotlessly clean and in keeping with the rest of the club. There was obviously plenty of money passing through the accounts. This was the only better class club in town and attracted all the middle and upper class clubmen, though the name of it would have excluded many of them had it been strictly applied.

On the outer wall stood three cabinets constructed of what looked like modern opaque glass sheeting. To these the Inspectors directed their attentions. Each was fitted with a small sash window let in the wall; each window was a little open at the top. Littlejohn tried each of them. They all moved freely.

“See?” he said to Kane. “A man could get through any of them. I contend that Gerald came down here with his friends, excused himself and locked himself in one of these. Then, when, as we’ve heard them say, his friends left the place, he climbed through. Look....”

Across the narrow street on to which the trio of windows gave, was the wall of one of the sheds of Worth’s storeyard. Just round the corner was the back gate to the place.

Littlejohn, nimble in spite of his large bulk, squeezed himself through one of the open windows. From outside he examined each sill. The work was interrupted a time or two as men came and went in the lavatory. Until the prey was in the trap and secured, the police had no intention of scaring him.

“Meet me in Griffiths’s room,” said Littlejohn to his colleague at length, and went round and entered the club by the main door again.

“There are distinct marks of somebody’s shoes on the middle sill,” he said when they met. “The dust and dirt of ages had accumulated there and the sill in question bears plain traces—scars caused by the side of the sole. There’s a store yard just outside. Now we know everything.

“Gerald knew that Henry would be outside at midnight. He managed to fix it in the intervals between games. Got his alibi, left his friends thinking he was shut in one of those places. In less than ten minutes he’d gone into the store yard, attracted his brother to the engine shed, lured him in, shut the door and gassed him. Then, he unlocked the door of the shed, hared back to the open lavatory window, slipped into the club again, washed his hands and strolled to the billiard table....”

“Quick work. He’d not much time.”

“He was lucky. Gas acts quickly, doesn’t it? Also, at that hour with not many but the stay-out-o’-nights at the club, nobody heard him climbing about and in and out of the window. As regards the alibi, too, the time was best, psychologically. No doubt, his companions were half fuddled with drink and half asleep from the late hour. They just took no account of a

perfectly normal absence of ten minutes. Like Chesterton's postman being an almost invisible man, the time spent on such short trips isn't counted in the day's schedule....”

Kane was getting out of his depth again.

“Come along and I'll show you the window sill, Kane.”

At the “Rod and Line” Vera Worth kept her appointment with the officers, and Cairns led her to a private room where they were awaiting her.

They were not long together. Littlejohn outlined his plan to Mrs. Worth. They made the necessary arrangements and then she left for the Hall.

At a little after eight o'clock, Littlejohn and Kane sat down to a hearty meal cooked by Mrs. Cairns herself. The feast was full of a kind of festive expectancy. If things turned out as they hoped, the Worth case should end that night.

CHAPTER XXI

THE TOWER ROOM

P.C. CYRIL WINDIBANK sat in the cosy kitchen of his cottage in a state of ecstatic coma. Before him, in imagination, were arrayed, tier upon tier, the members of a vast orchestra. He himself, clad in flawless evening dress, stood on a rostrum before them. By his side a beautiful artiste played the piano. In one of the musical bobby's hands was a long, slim baton. This he frenziedly used to thrash the air, at the same time weaving curious patterns with his left or stabbing the air viciously with it to call in an oboe or a clarinet. Now and then, he made pugnacious thrashings with his clenched fist to incite the drummer to get a move on. The pianist played exquisitely. Soon, amid applause, she would gracefully rise from the silent instrument, undulate towards the conductor's rostrum and shake him by the hand, holding his huge paw between her two delicate palms, with their long fingers caressing his own.

In real life, P.C. Windibank was seated before his radio set, in his shirt sleeves, with his boots off. His eyes were closed, his huge hands convulsively pawed the air and every now and then a finger would jerk forth, admonishing this or that instrumentalist or calling him into the hunt. His wife was busy knitting socks for the forces in another easy chair. She took not the least heed of her husband's epileptic antics. For twenty years that sort of thing had been going on and she had grown quite used to it. At first, she had thought him wonderful.... He was choirmaster at the local Baptist Chapel and the most musical member of the Trentbridge force. His favourite orchestra was now combining with his favourite pianist in a rendering of Schumann's Piano Concerto.

“Titirara diddle dee-dee-dee, pom-pom ...” burst forth P.C. Windibank, unable to refrain from joining in.

There was a thunderous knocking on the front door.

“Who the haitch is that at this time o’ night, and the orchestra workin’ up for the last movement ...? See who it is, Gertie, while I put me boots on....”

Mrs. Windibank returned from the front door accompanied by another tremendous lump of constabulary beef. All the constables in Trentbridge looked alike from behind! Enormous!! It was a marvel where they all came from. Even thin striplings began to swell visibly after signing-on and taking uniform....

The wireless continued to play. P.C. Windibank was determined to impress his visitor, Charlie Pugmire, police constable, that his tastes were far and above those of the rank and file of bobbies, even if Kane *had* unduly withheld the promotion due to one of his talents.

“Jest a minute, Charlie.... Jest listenin’ to a lovely bit o’ music. Hear that ...? Tididy-um-pom-pom.... Nearly makes you cry, doesn’t it?”

“Sorry, Cyril, but it’s urgent.... Got to turn out. We’re throwin’ a cordon round Trentvale Hall.... Inspector and that Scotland Yard chap have jest gone up and twelve of us have to follow....”

“Why pick on me on my night off? Listen to that....” P.C. Windibank indignantly indicated his wireless set.

As though gifted with an intelligence of its own, the machine suddenly decided to change its mind. The orchestra and piano slowly faded away and, as P.C. Windibank’s eyes grew puzzled and he cocked his head in mute query, the radio set began to explain unctuously:

“... and there we must end our symphony concert from a concert hall in the south west, as the time is eight-forty-five. For the next quarter of an hour you will hear a gramophone recital of swing numbers played by Billy Tilly and his Boys.”

“Come on, Charlie,” roared Windibank. “Let’s get out. Thank God for crime....” And they made a heavy exit to the sound of trumpets.

At the main gates of the Hall, a sergeant in charge of a posse of enormous constables met the two new arrivals.

“You, Pugmire, under that french window. Windibank ... *and* it’s taken you long enough to get here ... watch the front door under the shade of that there large ’olly bush.... And, as I’ve just told the rest, nobody’s to come out.... Stop ’em, by force if needs be. Got it? Now, all of you, to yer places

and see you take proper cover. Moon'll be out in about a quarter of an hour and remember ... yer dealin' with a killer...."

The dark helmeted mountains scattered themselves. Windibank, his ears burning from the sergeant's rebuke, stationed himself behind a large, clipped holly bush, one of a pair which stood one on each side of the main door of the house. They must have been there from the first, for they were strong, spreading trees, almost solid from masses of leaves.

Pr ... pr ... pom, te ... tiddle ... om, te ... tiddle ... om ... pom ... pom.... Windibank worked himself up to a cadenza whistled under his breath....

Inside the Hall, in the dining room, all the surviving Worth family were at dinner. The meal was drawing to a close. The soft footed, fishlike butler was serving a savoury. As he scooped portions on to the plates of Mr. Gerald, Miss Alice, and the Count, he seemed to hold aloof, as though afraid to contaminate himself by breathing within a yard of them. But he hovered solicitously over Vera, his eye ever upon her, even when he gave her mere sidelong glances. He looked as though at any moment he expected her to call upon him for help.

Vera sat at the head of the table, Gerald facing her at the other end, Alice and her husband on each of the two remaining sides. This family party was due to the fact that Vera had specially asked them all to meet her thus. She had something to say of importance to all of them. The others found it difficult to read her expression, for the shaded lamp illuminated the table brightly, but cast the rest in shadow. Their hands moved within the light, but their heads and faces bobbed in and out of the periphery as they bent to eat or drink.

Little had hitherto been said. A few words about the day's events, the manservant's whispered questions and replies to them, a murmur or two as one or another passed this or that on the table. They were all on tenterhooks.

Vera spoke at last.

"I hope you'll excuse me afterwards. I won't be able take coffee in the lounge with you. I'm busy packing my things. To-morrow I'm going to visit my father ... indefinitely...."

Gerald's long fingers closed convulsively round the fork he was holding. He leaned forward as though hard of hearing or disbelieving what he heard.

Alice's hands slid down to her lap in a gesture of surprise and resignation. Count Châteaulœuf goggled and a piece of food hanging from his lips fell on the cloth. He milled around with his napkin....

"Rather short notice.... Any idea how long you'll be gone?" It was Alice who spoke first. The skin on her temples seemed to grow tight and a pulse there could be seen beating.

"Don't be inquisitive, Alice," said Gerald suavely. "Vera is always full of surprises. She's her own mistress.... One would almost think she was ours, too, sometimes. We are never consulted."

Vera went on.

"None of you need feel uneasy. My absence will in no way upset your own arrangements. If I feel later as I do at present, I don't think I shall ever return here...."

The Count choked.

"But ... what about us.... The upkeep of this place ... the ... expenses...."

"You needn't worry, Armand. I've provided for that. I've made up my mind to cut adrift from Trentvale Hall and all its unhappy associations. I ought never to have come here in the beginning. I've been to see my lawyer and arranged for a trust to be formed whereby the estate will be kept up as long as the family remain here. The income will be paid to Alice monthly. It will more than suffice to pay all expenses and keep you both in a manner suitable for the tenants of such a place. *You'll* be the tenants, of course...."

Gerald sat back into the gloom. His face was inscrutable. The discussion might not have concerned him at all. Instead, he turned on the butler, who was standing, hands folded, by the sideboard, apparently pleased and relieved at what he had heard.

"What are you doin' there, Bancroft? Get out!"

"Very good, sir."

"You are more than generous...." The Count was slobbering.

"Damn you, Vera. You make one feel like real poor relations. We really can't ..." Alice began.

"It's already arranged beyond argument, Alice. All that remains for me is to pack up and begone. I can't bear living here any longer. And now, if you'll excuse me.... I'll see you again before I leave in the morning."

The men rose as she left her seat, but nothing was said.

“Good night, all of you.”

“Good night....”

When the door had finally closed, the remainder at the table put their heads together ominously....

Vera Worth, in her room, consulted her watch. Nine-forty. In five minutes the two Inspectors should be arriving.

Outside, the two men had brought round a ladder, laid at the foot of the side wall for A.R.P. purposes, and erected it beneath Mrs. Worth’s window. At the appointed time, they mounted it and scrambled on to the balcony and thence indoors. Vera was waiting for them.

The room had been disordered since Littlejohn’s last visit. Clara had been busy packing and had left many of her mistress’s belongings scattered here and there for her to sort and pack herself. There was tissue paper on floors and furniture, and trunks and suit cases lying awaiting final closing. Vera hastily cleared some of the mess and pointed to the adjoining bathroom.

“That might be a good hiding place for the two of you. Gerald’s hardly likely to go in there if he calls,” she said after she had greeted them.

“Not for both of us, Mrs. Worth,” remarked Littlejohn. “It’s not strategically sound for the pair of us to be bottle-necked in there. Suppose he tries swift violence, where are we? I think I’d better post myself there....”

He indicated the window embrasure, where, covered by heavy curtains, the ledge offered a comfortable seat and the alcove satisfactory concealment.

“Very well, Inspector. Perhaps Mr. Kane won’t mind a bathroom chair.... Or, we could wheel in an easy.... But Gerald might miss it and wonder....”

“Don’t worry about me, madam.... I won’t want to be too easy. After the dinner Inspector Littlejohn provided me, I might fall asleep if I’m too cosy....”

Kane hawhawed self-consciously. He was exhibiting an almost prudish uneasiness at being in the bedroom of a strange woman. This was not mitigated by the presence of articles of intimate lingerie scattered about. In the face of danger, Kane looked afraid of being seduced.

“We’d better be getting ourselves hidden,” said Littlejohn. “No telling when the alarm might occur.”

The Inspectors took off their outdoor clothes and Vera placed them in a wardrobe out of sight.

“There’s a matter I think I ought to mention,” whispered Vera, for the heat of the chase was descending on the party as though the expected prowler were on the very doorstep. “My revolver’s missing!”

“Your revolver? I didn’t know you ’ad one.”

Kane, whose normal duties consisted in seeing that those under his jurisdiction obeyed the thousand and one legal regulations, looked more comfortable as he turned his mind to mundane things. “You never applied to us for a permit....”

“I had one before I came here.... I forgot to renew it....”

“Most irregular....”

“You were saying, Mrs. Worth ... the pistol’s missing?”

Littlejohn thought it well to terminate this fit of disapproval.

“It’s not a pistol, Inspector, but a small revolver my father gave me once. I used to shoot rats with it in the stables. I had it in a drawer here for a long time and almost forgot about it. To-night I remembered it and went to pack it. It had gone. I’m not saying it’s been stolen, but I can’t see where I could have mislaid it....”

“Was it loaded ...?”

“Yes. Perhaps careless of me, but nobody was in the habit of rummaging in the drawer where I kept it....”

“Sounds queer.... However, let’s get to our hiding places. We’ll be getting caught....” Kane was getting a guilty look on his face again. Littlejohn wondered if he was afraid of Mrs. Kane and whether he’d tell her where he’d spent the evening, or not.... He imagined a heavy, jealous, possessive woman. Actually, she was much younger than Kane and somewhat of a fly-by-night....

“What if he’s got the loaded revolver with ’im, Littlejohn?”

“We’ll have to take it from him, Kane.”

“But we’re not armed.... Haven’t even got a truncheon myself. You’ve not got a revolver, eh?”

“No. We’ll have to find suitable missiles if we need ’em. The element of surprise is a point in our favour. Let’s be getting hidden.”

Littlejohn took up his place in the window bay. Kane gingerly entered the bathroom and his eyes opened wide at the sight of it, for it was of green

glass, with a bath and washbowl to match. He perched himself ponderously on a green chair, turned off the green shaded light at a green light switch and breathed a sigh of relief for the blessing of darkness, or rather of half light, for the door was half open and a long shaft penetrated from the bedroom.

Vera Worth set about packing as though no interruption had occurred, but her body was tense and she had no heart for her task.

Kane sat in an atmosphere of bath salts, scented soap and tooth paste, and thought how much more sensible was his own white tiled bathroom at home with its enamelled iron bath and the white tin cabinet in which reposed the moth eaten shaving brush and cokernut shell with a piece of lathery soap in it which he used every morning. Meanwhile, Littlejohn, his legs dangling from the window sill, fingered his cold pipe lovingly and wondered how long it would be before he would be able to light it. He sniffed the bowl....

Soft footsteps were approaching along the corridor. There was a knock on the door.

“Who’s there?”

“Gerald, Vera. May I come in?”

“Yes. The room’s in a mess. I’m busy packing....”

Gerald Worth entered and screwed up his eyes as the bright light caught them after the dimness of the corridor.

“Thought I’d come along and have a private word with you, Vera. Your news at dinner took the wind out of my sails a bit. I couldn’t say much with Alice and Armand goggling there.... So you’re leaving us, Vera. What for?”

“I can’t bear this place any longer, Gerry. It’s got on my nerves. Your father ... then Henry ... then Miss Rickson. I can’t stand any more of it. I’ve a feeling that Miss Rickson wasn’t the last, either. I ... I ...”

“What on earth are you talking about, Vera? Because the police thought Ricky was murdered, it doesn’t mean to say that we do.... Let ‘em play about with their theories. They’ll get tired in time....”

Vera continued to pack. Littlejohn, watching through a slit in his curtain, thought she was rather overdoing the preoccupation with her job.

Gerald was standing, too, his eyes roving about the room. He seemed to be waiting for something. He wore a lounge suit with his hands thrust deep into the side pockets of the jacket. The bright light gave him a dissipated look. His head was held slightly on one side as though he were listening....

“Did you think somebody deliberately killed Henry and Miss Rickson, Vera?”

“I can’t think of anything else. It surely couldn’t have been accidental or deliberate suicide in either case....”

“Agree with the police, do you? Been questioning you of late again, have they? Who do you think did it ...?”

Vera continued to put objects into her trunk. It could hardly be described as orderly packing. Her hands trembled.

Gerald seized her by the shoulders and turned her about to face him.

“Come on, Vera. Tell me who did it.... The last man seen with Henry was a chap called Bartlett. They were quarrelling about his daughter—his lovely daughter. Henry had been casting lascivious eyes on her. The police are after him now, I hear.”

“Leave me alone. You’d better be getting along. I’ve a lot to do before I retire for the night.”

She freed herself and pointed to the door.

“Oh no, you don’t, my lady. You’ve been high-and-mightiness of this place long enough. Now you’ll listen to me. You think *I* killed Henry and Ricky, don’t you ...? Don’t deny it. I can see it in your eyes. Very well, then. I’ll tell you the reason of my little visit to you now. It was through you I did it all.... I didn’t *want* to kill Henry and Ricky.... You were the one I wanted out of the way. They got mixed up in the affair and I had to clear them off.... You took all our birthright ... filched all that belonged to the family. Nothing but your death could put things right. I decided to rid the family of you. Then Henry and Ricky interfered.... So ... I had to be rid of them. Gently ... that’s the way I did it. They didn’t suffer. Died in their sleep both of ‘em....”

Gerald Worth was warming to his tale. His eyes sparkled. His curly hair, through which he passed his hand nervously, hung like a limp mop over his brow. He towered above Vera, standing between her and the door, thrusting his body at her in a half swaggering, half bullying gesture.

“Well. Why don’t you say something, Vera? I managed it very cleverly, you must admit. The police accepted my alibi without a murmur. I took ten minutes from start to finish in dealing with Henry. And as for Ricky ... she was old and finished. It *had* to be done. She accused me of it and threatened to put that prowling fellow from London on my track. She knew it was *you*

I was after. Yes. I'd been doctoring your tea ... and I stuffed up your gun. You had a lucky break there....

"Henry caught me at your teapot one morning. What he was doing messing about the corridors in his dressing gown at that hour, I don't know. He didn't say anything at the time. But when your damned dog died, he began to smell a rat. He did a bit of private snooping on his own and threatened that if I didn't end my plans for eliminating you, he'd have to tell the police. I *couldn't* let him do that. Had to stop his mouth. Judge of my horror and surprise, when I found out that Ricky knew as well. The thing was becoming public property. So ..."

Gerald took a step closer to Vera, who retreated before him.

"Well ... what have you to say about it, Vera? Clever, wasn't it, the way I kept suspicion from myself? Now I'm going to crown the lot. I'm going to kill you! Not only that. I'm going to make it look just like suicide, Vera. You're going to die from your own revolver.... I took it when the rest of you were below just before dinner."

He took from his pocket a small revolver and balanced it airily in the palm of his hand.

"You see, Vera, I knew you were leaving us to-night before you announced it at dinner. When I came in earlier this evening, I found the letter you'd written to your brother waiting in the hall for Bancroft to take to post. I took the liberty of confiscating it. For a purpose of my own. You're tired of it all, Vera. That's what you tell Stanley, in your sisterly epistle. Tired of it all and are going to put an end to it by leaving us and going to live with your father. You also say you think you know who killed Henry and Miss Rickson and will tell him more when next you see him, as you can't write all that you know. What do you know, Vera? And *how* do you know who killed Henry and Ricky?"

"Leave me alone, Gerald. You're overwrought. Get along to bed. We'll talk in the morning...."

"No we won't, my lady. For, by that time, you'll have followed the other two. They'll find you dead, here, in the morning. Your own gun will be in your hand, there'll be a bullet in your brain, and on the desk will be found a letter in your handwriting saying you're tired of it all, Vera, and going to put an end to it. And that you killed Henry and Miss Rickson...."

“No such letter of mine will be found. You can kill me, you lunatic, but I’ll never write such a ...”

“My dear Vera, it’s already written and in my pocket ready for use. You very kindly supplied a full vocabulary in your own hand in your letter to Stanley. Whilst you were all waiting dinner for me, I was busy tracing out the necessary words on draughtsman’s paper. Then, I assembled them in the order I wanted, traced them thinly through on to a sheet of your own notepaper and finally went over the lot in ink in your own thick handwriting. You’d be surprised how convincing the finished article looks. The police’ll swallow it, just as they swallowed all the rest of my plans....”

“You must think the Scotland Yard man’s a fool, Gerald. Let me tell you ...”

“A perfect bloody fool. Up and down the town, backwards and forwards in the streets, and up here at the Hall until the place stinks of him and the police. He’ll be glad of your confession and the chance to say he’s solved the case. I wouldn’t be surprised if he didn’t say your suicide was the result of the guilt with which he’s faced you.”

Worth, by this time, was talking like one demented. He mouthed his words and slobbered, thrusting his face close to Vera’s.

“You thought you’d got us all in your toils when you came here, didn’t you, Vera? Trapped the old man into leaving you his fortune. And not content with that, you wanted the two sons to crawl at your feet as well....”

“Well, Gerald, you nearly did, didn’t you?...”

“No ... NEVER,” screamed Worth.

With a quick movement, he seized Vera by the arm, spun her round and held her, with her back close to his chest and raised the gun he was holding to her right temple.

“Say your prayers, Vera.... Here ends ...”

A brass candlestick, skilfully flung by Littlejohn, caught him on the elbow and sent the pistol spinning to the ground. Before Gerald realized what had happened, Littlejohn was on him in two swift strides. They fell to the ground, struggling, but the scuffle was short. Kane arrived on the scene, carrying his own missile which he had just been ready to throw when Littlejohn beat him to it. A bottle of bath salts! Littlejohn rose from his seat in the middle of Gerald’s back, dragged him to his feet by the scruff of his neck....

Kane, assured that Littlejohn had a firm grip on their prisoner, walked purposefully to the wardrobe which held his overcoat and produced from the pocket of that garment a formidable looking document. He stood before Gerald Worth like a university professor presenting a diploma to a successful student on graduation day.

“Gerald Worth, I arrest you ...” he commenced to intone, and pointed to his warrant as though his salvation rested therein. But Gerald Worth wasn’t having any. With a final burst of energy, he wrenched himself free, flung Littlejohn and Kane together with a deft movement, and made for the door. He was through it in a flash, but unfortunately for him, the huge bulk of Bancroft, bearing a tray of something or other, barred his way. Worth made no effort to pass the mass of flab which would surely have yielded him place, but without hesitating, turned and sped in the opposite direction. There was no way out by that route, which ended in a staircase leading to the attics and tower room. Up the steps flew the fugitive, with the two detectives hard on his heels.

The tower room with its bell turret was added to the main structure of Trentvale Hall by a one-time owner who was terrified of burglars and fire. A rope attached to a bell hanging in a turret open to the four winds, passed through the roof and then through a series of holes in the floors to the cellars. Thus, on no matter which floor fire might break out or burglars break in, the one discovering it could rush to the rope, tug it and rouse the neighbourhood. This precaution must have acted as a charm, for never in its two hundred years of history had the least blaze or unlawful intruder ravaged the house.

Rushing upwards, instinctively placing as much distance as possible between himself and his would-be captors, Gerald Worth realized that he was trapped, unless he ran the risk of jumping for it from a second storey window. Then, an idea struck him.... It was not a new one, in fact. Once, in childhood, when pursued by Henry and Alice in a Wild West game, he had done it at the risk of his young neck.

He landed in the tower room just as the two Inspectors reached the attics. Locking the door to give himself a few extra minutes, Gerald scrambled through the skylight and soon was standing on the roof, gripping the stone side of the turret. The bell rope still hung from the top of the bell and he

seized it, hauling it up from the rooms below until he held it free in his hand.

The door ripped and cracked as Littlejohn put his weight against it. Gerald hastily tested the strength of the rope and gripping it firmly, slid over the parapet and launched himself over it, bracing his feet against the wall. If he could get down on terra firma and reach the garage before his pursuers grasped his strategy, he'd have a chance.

As the weight of the hunted man tightened the rope, the bell gave tongue to one appalling, cracked note like a death knell.... At the same time the rope on which Gerald was depending, broke where it joined the bell.

Worth fell backwards into blackness and as he fell, uttered a wild, lost cry. The two unholy sounds broke the stillness and made more than one of the constables on duty shiver in his shoes.

Beneath the spot where this tragic pantomime was going on, stood P.C. Windibank. He was whistling to himself, softly, the piano concerto from which he had been torn at home. He only knew scraps of it by heart, so his rendering was a bit of Schumann and a lot of Windibank. The difference this time was that instead of conducting the orchestra, the bobby was playing the solo piano and, instead of conducting the solo instrument as in his previous imagining, he was leading the lot from the keyboard, conductor and all....

The note of the bell annoyed the musical constable. It put him clean off pitch, but before he could gather himself together for a fresh start, a terrible scream was emitted above his head and then the sound of a falling body....

There was a splitting crash in the holly bush which was shielding Windibank from the cold night breezes. He abandoned his music, flashed his torch, saw Gerald spreadeagled among the leaves and branches, and scrambling among the welter himself, grasped the half-unconscious disturber with his huge hands, hugged him to his burly chest with one paw and blew a series of windbroken blasts on his whistle with the help of the other.

Gerald Worth was hanged for the murder of his brother and his old nurse. The evidence of Vera, Kane and Littlejohn was important at the trial as also was the forged confession and letter of farewell he had planned to leave

beside the dead body of Vera and which was found in his jacket pocket when he was arrested. Worth protested his innocence almost to the last and tried to bluff a psychologist or two on the matter of his sanity. Just before they came for him at the final hour, he astounded the prison chaplain by proving his knowledge of holy writ in an extraordinary quotation....

“And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother’s blood from thy hand.... And Cain said, My punishment is greater than I can bear....”

The murderer had been dead five minutes before the poor parson realized the full significance of his last words.

CHAPTER XXII

A SURPRISE AT THE END

ON the morning after the arrest, Littlejohn called on Vera Worth at the Hall to square up one or two details and round off the case. Their business finished, she offered him coffee, which he accepted.

Throughout the affair, Littlejohn had felt that the principal character had been a dead man. William Worth. By his re-marriage and subsequent behaviour and by a pernicious Will, the old man had sown the seeds of family tragedy. He had wrecked the life and almost caused the murder of his widow. He had caused his younger son to kill the elder and had brought about the shameful death of an old and tried servant, Miss Rickson.

To Littlejohn, whose mind worked in images, this unseen but dominant actor in the Worth calamity had definitely taken shape, although he had never seen him or even had him described. In the Inspector's imagination, however, he stood out distinctly. In fact, he closely resembled Mrs. Littlejohn's uncle, Jeremy Uprichard, the obstinate and domineering *enfant terrible* of an otherwise charming and happy family.

A stocky man of medium build, with a solid body planted firmly on sturdy legs. Brow broad and rather low; nose heavy and bulbous; square head well covered in crisp unruly grey hair; short, strong, curly beard covering most of his face, with red, thick, sensual lips making a gash in the midst of its blackness. Dark eyes, cunning and small, deeply set under heavy, aggressive eyebrows. Stumpy hands with stubby coarse fingers. Dress of dark homespun, with carelessly worn linen of an old-fashioned style. Thus William Worth in Littlejohn's imaginary rogues' gallery.

As they shook hands and said good-bye, Littlejohn had a sudden whim to confirm or set right his mental impressions.

"You know, Mrs. Worth," he said. "There's one thing I'd like to see, if you have one here. A picture of the late William Worth. He's been such a dominant factor in this case, I feel I know him already."

"Do you, Inspector?"

She gave him a queer sidelong glance and her lips twisted almost in scorn.

"Come into the dining room. There's a full length portrait of him, painted when he got elevated to the bench.... An R.A. did it and it might be described as lifelike, although you had to know him in the flesh to ... However, come along."

For some reason she had laughed. A harsh, unseemly noise, Littlejohn thought, as though she was overwrought. In view of the tragedy played out around her, perhaps it might be excused.

They were in the dining room in which the tense meal had been eaten on the previous night. Over the fireplace hung the portrait. It had been, indeed, well done by someone who had instilled into it a maximum fulness of life and energy.

Littlejohn gasped and his mental picture was instantly shattered.

There stood a small man in a very formal suit of black with grey striped trousers. He was dressed immaculately as though for a wedding. His hands were long bony hands and his head was long bony head. His hair was thin, grey and worn *en brosse*. Lips a mere red line; nose long, narrow and pointed. Chin almost receding. And on the upper lip a rambling, badly trimmed moustache of the walrus variety, grey, ragged, looking as though frost had suddenly fixed it into a solid mass. The eyes, however, held the attention. They were like blue glass marbles, clear, without expression, dead to outside suffering or beauty. There was a look of mulish cunning and malevolent conceit about the whole face....

"A stupid, stubborn man ... an iceberg...."

Vera Worth was trying to sum up her late husband's character without a qualm. She stood musing as if to herself and seemed to have forgotten there was someone at her side.

Littlejohn, who had been brought up in the *nil nisi bonum* school, disliked her attitude intensely.

"Stupid and stubborn to the last. He was only ill four days in the end. With his remaining strength, he refused any nurses but Alice and me. She

took days; I took nights. He died during the fourth night and I was with him alone....”

Littlejohn would laugh at any suggestion that he is psychic, or, for that matter, in any way sensitive to telepathic or other occult means of communication. Since the case of the bogus poltergeist at Harwood, he has been even more sceptical about such things, although his wife is different. Yet, something in Vera Worth’s eyes as she looked upward at the portrait, cast a brief and unholy spell over the Inspector.

He was again in the bedroom in which he and Kane had kept vigil on the previous night. Only this time, the bed was occupied by the panting, pyjama clad form of the man in the picture over the fireplace. The crisis of illness was upon him. The doctor had administered the specific. All that remained was to wait for the turn for the better. He was holding his own.... Then, a hand tore aside the curtains, flung wide the windows, cast back the bedclothes from the prostrate sweating form....

Littlejohn shook himself.

“I must be going. Train to catch, you know....”

Vera Worth seemed suddenly to wake from a trance.

“Of course, Inspector. Excuse my vagueness. I’m a bit overwrought.”

Their eyes met and in Vera’s Littlejohn thought he detected a crafty look of inquiry, of fear. Then the doors seemed to close on her feelings and she was once more herself.

“Good-bye.”

They did not shake hands again.

The Hall no longer belongs to the Worths. A combine bought the foundry and took over the house as well for a workers’ rest centre. Alice and the Count have left the district and are wandering from one residential hotel to another....

Vera Worth is back at her father’s home. She is now a voluntary nurse at a nearby military hospital. She is engaged to be married again. This time it is an elderly surgeon. He is reputed to be a martinet and a difficult man to get on with. Maybe, Vera will teach him better.

THE END

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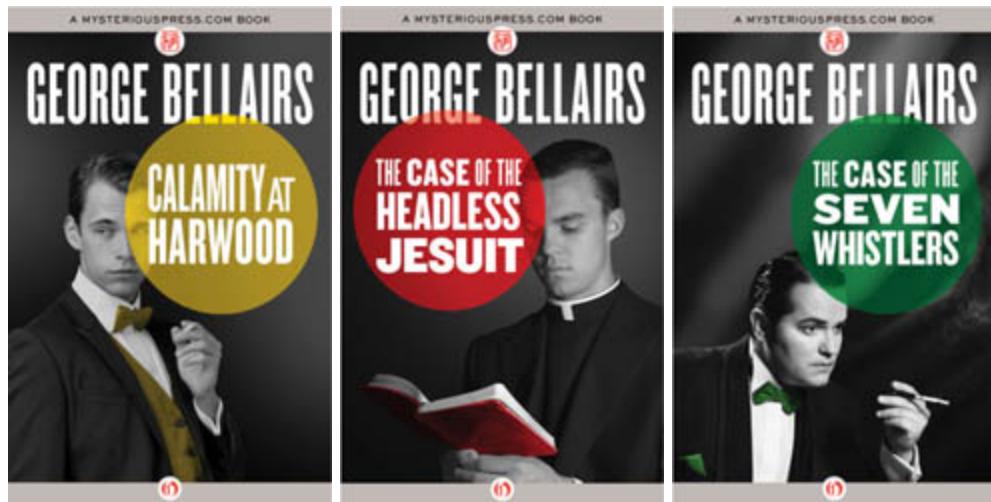
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